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THE LURE OF THUNDER ISLAND

WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

Dennis Cleveland was at a loose end, when Fate put him in touch with Dr. Flint, the blind scientist. The upshot was that Cleveland agreed to accompany Dr. Flint to Africa in search of a case alleged to contain forty skulls of great antiquarian interest.

Patricia Howard claims that the skulls are hers, a legacy from a dead uncle, and she, too, proceeds to Africa to retrieve them. There is also Dusi Khan, a sinister Egyptian, who manifests an interest in the mysterious remains.

The three parties meet at Thunder Island, where the dramatic tension of the situation becomes so acute that incident follows thrilling incident with startling rapidity.

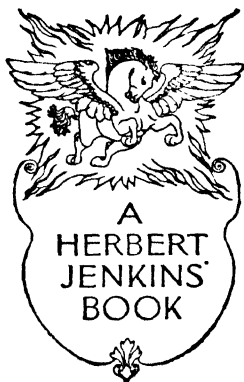
What does the mysterious case really contain?

Upon that hangs a thrilling story of adventure, intrigue and romance, with many touches of comedy.

THE LURE OF THUNDER ISLAND

BY
LEO
WALMSLEY

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THE LURE OF THUNDER ISLAND

CHAPTER I

I HEAR OF THE FORTY SKULLS

VICIOUSLY I slammed behind me the street-door of the White Hart Residential Hotel, hung my sodden hat on the hall-stand, and climbed the tortuous old-fashioned staircase to my room. I pulled the bell, went on pulling the bell, until Phœbe, the scraggiest, ugliest, gloomiest female that ever wielded mop, or mis-made a bed, came in.

"'Ere's the 'ot water, sir," said she in her thin, sad voice, "an' there's two letters I put on the table along with the bill the lydy said I 'ad to give you, sir. Anyfink else, sir?"

"Nothing, thank you," I replied. "Eight o'clock, and breakfast as usual. A nasty night?"

"It be, awful weather it be." Her words echoed mournfully along the corridor as she paddled back to the kitchen.

She was worse than the fog. I bolted the door behind her, and looked at the letters. The bill

I had seen before, and, screwing up my courage, I opened the epistle that bore the Whiteport postmark, and my father's familiar handwriting.

"MY DEAR DENNIS,—

"By this time it has possibly dawned on you that there are greater fools in the world than old fools. When I told Sir Henry I had offered you a working partnership in the firm, he suggested I should have a month's good rest. When I told him you had refused to take it, he asked me frankly if I considered insanity to be hereditary.

"Honestly, my boy, I cannot share your enthusiasm in this new scheme for filming big-game from an aeroplane, and it is no surprise to me that the various city people you have interviewed think likewise. I'll admit it was nothing less than sheer misfortune that prevented you from being the first to fly from London to Cape Town, and I do not grudge the money I lost by your crash. At the same time I cannot see my way to finance you in the new 'stunt,' as you call it, neither can I give you an allowance without some practical return. As you know, the firm is one of the few that did not rake in a fortune during the war.

"Surely you have had enough adventure during the last six years to give you a taste for quieter things. September 1 is your twenty-eighth birthday, and so far as I can make out, you are still without a profession, unless you call flying one.

"For heaven's sake, my sake, and your own, be

sensible. My offer stands, and with it the assurance of a safe and splendid future, commercially and otherwise. I should have liked you to take an interest in politics; the name of Cleveland is not unpopular in the constituency and—well, you know my pet ambition. And marriage—have you thought of it? I saw Margaret Stoneham only yesterday; what a splendid wife she'd make you. But there, it is not my place to advise on such a delicate matter. She likes you, anyway.

"Think it out, Dennis, and let me know by return you've accepted. There is a small cheque enclosed, which I trust will relieve the present financial strain.

"Your very affectionate,
"FATHER."

Dear old dad, I thought. He will never see that his gods are not mine, that the breath of the wide seas and the sun-scorched veldt mean more to me than the crinkle of bank-notes and the dignity of commercial success. Heavens! to become a partner in the highly respectable and respected firm of John Cleveland, Ltd., with the "assurance of a safe and splendid future," to fetter my limbs in the silk and serge of a successful business man, to don the garb of smug respectability, to take an interest in politics, to marry Miss Margaret Stoneham!

Placing the cheque in my pocket-book (I am not entirely devoid of the business instinct), I rolled the unnecessary portion of my father's candid communication into a spill, lighted a cigarette and opened the second letter with the philosophic resignation that

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my correspondent would prove to be a Jew. A single glance at it, however, sufficed to show me I was wrong, and to set my heart thumping wild with excitement.

It was typewritten—even to the signature. I read it breathlessly.

“ 242 CAVENDISH SQUARE, W.

“ MY DEAR CAPTAIN CLEVELAND,—

“ I should be glad to see you any evening this week between eight and nine.

“ Kindly note that I am totally blind.

“ Yours very sincerely,

“ WALLACE FLINT, M.D.”

I cannot give a very accurate description of what happened during the next two minutes. I have a blurred memory of dashing down the staircase, out into the road, dodging between a taxi and a postman's tricycle, tearing along Villiers Street and boarding a West-bound bus. It is a very blurred memory, and no wonder, considering what happened later.

Most people have probably forgotten the great London to Cape Town Air Race and the crash of the Scott-Hemery aeroplane at Luxor. I have tried to forget it myself, for I had invested my last farthing in that ill-fated enterprise, and we were then two clear days ahead of what proved to be the winning machine. Dad, who had helped to finance me, took his loss kindly, and decently offered me a well-paid post in the firm, which I accepted and endeavoured to fill for several months.

But it was agony to me. I felt like a caged lion, and a fortnight ago I intimated to him that the wild was calling, that if I didn't soon find something more exciting than account books, I should become insane. It was not an interview that I care to dwell upon, and the result of it was that I packed up and came to London, took a room at the old White Hart in Adelphi (for which part of London I have a very great fondness), and tried to raise interest and funds for an aeroplane-big-game cinema expedition to Central Africa.

Hare-brained? Well, that's what dad thought, and perhaps to a certain extent he was right, but there could be no doubt that a sensational film of stampeding elephant, and other game taken from the air would sell, and I had little doubt that I could take it, provided I could raise the necessary cash. Yet I might have been asking for the wherewithal to run an expedition to the moon, so little effect had my efforts on the minds and pockets of those dealers in fortune who pitch their tents round London Wall.

The Wardour Street film people (I had interviewed them all) were inclined to rudeness. One man sarcastically suggested I should try an advertisement in *The Times*. As I had thought seriously of doing so before, I bought a current copy therefore and glanced down the Personal Column to get some idea as to how I should word my appeal. Thus it was that I saw the following announcement, which, if it excited no hope for the realization of my schemes, at least held promise of adventure and Africa.

WANTED for scientific expedition, gentleman of some mechanical knowledge, or nautical training, with experience of Tropical Africa. Box 1056.

I applied without delay, saying in my letter that I was an amateur yachtsman, and that two-thirds of my war service had been with the Royal Flying Corps in East and Central Africa. That was a week ago, and now, when I had indeed given up all hope, had come the answer. No wonder then that I was thrilled, that I could not bear to wait a second, but must have that interview at once.

I got off at Oxford Circus, and reached Cavendish Square just as the church clocks were striking the third quarter—a quarter to nine.

The lift-attendant at 242 was just locking up.

"An appointment, sir?"

"Yes, Dr. Flint. I'm a bit late though."

"Will you come straight up, sir? His man's just gone orf. What did you say yer name was, sir?"

"Cleveland—Captain Cleveland."

"There's a young lady with him, sir, I believe. Wait 'ere, sir, I'll see if 'ee can see you."

I stood by the lift-gate while the man walked along the dark thickly-carpeted corridor. Suddenly I heard the opening of a door on the right, and a woman's voice speaking excitedly.

"I can't—I won't believe you. My uncle was perfectly sane to the very last moment. You are hiding something. If you won't tell me, I'll find out for myself—I'll——"

The speaker broke off abruptly as the attendant drew near. I heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and from the shadows there appeared the figure of a girl—coming towards the lift.

I stood back from the gates as she entered. In the glare of the electric light she half turned, and caught, with a frank challenge, the inquiry that was in my eyes. I felt myself going red, for the eyes that were looking straight into mine, challenging, defiant, thrillingly feminine, were the loveliest I have ever seen. Another second, and I should have yielded to an irresistible impulse and spoken to her; but the lift-attendant returned.

"The doctor will see you now, sir. First door on the right."

He stepped in and pulled the iron folding-gate to with a clang. The lift descended.

The first door on the right was open, and at the end of a short passage I had a glimpse of a broad low room, dimly lighted by a green shaded table-lamp. A gas-fire burned dully in the grate, and standing with his back towards it was a wizened, round-shouldered old man. His head and face were devoid of hair, his skin dry and furrowed like that of a mummy. He wore a black velvet skull-cap, and his fingers played nervously with the bowl of a huge brier pipe he had in his mouth.

"Captain Cleveland!" he said in a surprisingly loud but medodious voice. "Come in, old fellow, come right in. Delighted to meet you, delighted I am. Told you I was blind, didn't I? Blind as a bat I am. Give me your hand, old fellow," he added.

I saw as I drew near that his eyes were roving, trying to adjust themselves to an impossible focus. They were very discomfoting, even more so than the nature of his greeting. The hand that he stretched out was white and bony ; the long skinny fingers curved round mine and held it in a peculiar bird-like grip. I could feel the spasmodic jerking of his muscles pulsing up my arm like the waves from an electric coil. I felt that he was trying to establish an unnatural connection with my consciousness and get a knowledge of my character. I had a sensation too that he was succeeding, that he was draining my mind as a stoat sucks a rabbit's life blood, that he was dissecting my memory, my desires, my intentions, my very ego, as he would the tissues of a frog.

Suddenly his grip relaxed.

"Now, my dear Cleveland, we know each other, don't we? Know one another well, we do. Sit down, sit down. You'll find a box of cigars on your left. Perfect condition. They're my one weakness, but I smoke my pipe when I'm thinking."

I took a cigar and, in my nervousness, lighted it at the wrong end.

"I was deeply interested in your letter," he continued, "profoundly interested. My boy, I know Africa ; I have crossed it from north to south, from east to west. Egypt I know, the Sahara, the Congo forest, Rhodesia, Uganda, Cape Colony, Somaliland, Nigeria, Morocco, Abyssinia, I know 'em all. It is a wonderful country, wonderful beyond compare, is Africa. Perhaps the bitterest thought I have in these days of eternal darkness is that I

shall never see my Africa again. Blindness is worse than death to one who has seen the loveliest in life. Yet I find consolation in the fact that there are worse things than blindness. Are you married?"

The question was so sudden that I stammered "No," like a schoolboy caught in some illicit act.

"I'm glad of it, very glad. Women are the very devil," he cried, and jumped up from his chair, and stood shaking by the fire. "The devil incarnate," he added. "My boy, shun a woman as you would a venomous snake, as you would a lurking scorpion. There's not a reptile that squirms through the swamps of Africa whose company I would not prefer to that of the female of my own species.

"Woman is the one great flaw in Nature's highest product—a hideous crack in a magnificent edifice. To me it is the biggest anomaly in Nature that man in his high state of evolution should reproduce himself by a method that necessitates the existence of an inferior edition of himself, devoid of all his finer attributes, without the power of reasoning, without a sense of truth, of honour, or ordinary decency.

"From the first gleam of intelligence in the mind of man, woman has sought to discourage, to obstruct, to inhibit his mental growth, to hold him back to the primitive state, to make him a creature of no other impulse than that of brute desire."

"But surely," I protested, for this was more than I could stand, "surely we owe something to them—culture, love of beauty, the instinct of chivalry, surely these——"

"There is no depth"—he might have been stone deaf as well as blind for all the notice he took of my interruption—"there is no depth of treachery to which a woman will not sink to further her own ends. Usually, my life is ordered so that I have no contact with womenkind. My man, Baxter, who reads my letters for me, and shares the duties of secretary and valet, although himself a semi-invalid, is an unfailing barrier between myself and all females. Yet the she-devil you have passed in the corridor, with the cunning born only of her sex, watched her chance, waited until Baxter had left me, then exercised her snake-like qualities upon the gibbering fool who works the lift. She entered this room with the intention of robbing a seemingly helpless man of something for which he has already sacrificed half his life. Something that is his—mine, mine alone."

He had worked himself up into such a state that I began to fear he was going to have a seizure. However, he tottered safely back into his chair.

"Mine it is, mine. . . . But there, old fellow, I am forgetting myself. An old man has many weaknesses. Would you mind, on the table near the window? You'll take a little whisky? You'll like it; my boy, you'll like it—can't get the real stuff now for love or money. I made that myself. A scientific training has many advantages. . . . Ah, yes, just a couple of inches in mine; half soda. Delightful stuff, delightful it is. Come, let us drink to the success of our expedition—and then to business."

He made an odd picture, sitting there in the semi-

gloom, his small, wizened body half-hid in the depths of an easy-chair, his white, hairless face in ghostlike relief against the dark upholstery. The red glow of the fire played in his restless eyes, and on the ribs of the tumbler trembling in his hand. I had a feeling that those eyes of his had a sight that is given to no ordinary man, that before them my brain was as naked as a shelled pea. The whisky, however, was excellent.

"Now, old man," he said, "I'm going to tell you a story. Give me your hand again, and promise that your lips are sealed to everything I say." He took my hand while I mumbled out a promise. I had not yet quite recovered from his overwhelming cordiality.

"Not that I have any doubt," as he sank back into his chair. "We know one another, don't we? Know one another well, we do."

Then, in a low, musical, clear-toned voice, his words phrased with neat exactitude, his style much like that of the scientific pedagogue, with just an occasional touch of the picturesque, he began his story, which, in all conscience, was as strange a one as any man with heart set high on adventure might wish to hear.

"I am an anthropologist. For many years I have been particularly interested in problems relating to the primitive tribes of Africa. I was the first scientist to make a detailed examination of the cranial characteristics of several pigmy races of the Congo Forest, and to carry out anthropological research among the lesser-known tribes of Abyssinia. Interesting work it is, profoundly interesting.

“Late in 1913 I organised a new expedition to the upper regions of the Nile, with the object of corroborating some of my earlier observations. There is always a chance of finding something of archaeological interest in these districts, and I took with me as assistant Professor Ernest Sladen, an Egyptologist of considerable repute, and a man of all-round scientific merit. A man of great ability he was, yet he proved himself to be one of the most unutterable scoundrels who ever set foot on the earth. A damnable rogue, he was, devoid of all principle; jealous, grasping, treacherous, as that she-devil who tried to rob me.

“I did not learn the true character of the man until, purely by accident, we discovered in the primeval forest the ruins of El Khazar, which, as you are probably aware, are the oldest relics of civilised man yet known to science. It was a discovery of tremendous importance, and rather than report it immediately to the authorities, we decided to make excavations, and to examine thoroughly the whole site, so that we might have a splendidly complete announcement to make to the scientific world. We were enthusiastic. It was to be a crowning reward for my thirty years' labour in Africa. We set our porters digging, and we joined in the manual work ourselves.

“It was Sladen who first pushed his spade into the now famous catacombs. Purely by chance it was, yet on that very accident did he base his claim for the whole honour of the discovery. In the catacombs were mummies of great antiquity—the kings and queens of a dynasty at whose existence

the authorities had hardly even guessed. Yet even more interesting than these, was a tomb containing a collection of skulls, many of which showed remarkable divergence of racial type. Remarkable they were, remarkable!" His hands began to tremble again—and it was with an obvious effort that he carried on in the same cool voice. "There were forty of them, arrayed carefully along a series of stone ledges, with an inscription below each. Sladen set to work immediately on the inscriptions, but at the end of a fortnight he professed himself incapable of reading them.

"It was then that I learned of his treachery. I came across a scrap of paper he had been writing on. It showed that he had found the key to the ancient characters; that the secret of the skulls was his. I did not accuse him of dishonesty; but, by means of the key, made a translation myself.

"There was a main inscription on the wall above the shelves which gave an account of how the armies of the Great King went out to conquer and subdue the tribes of the earth—how they returned victorious, bringing the heads of the slain kings of forty tribes. The inscription below each skull gave the name of the king, his tribe, and the whereabouts of his kingdom.

"You can imagine what the discovery would mean to an anthropologist, like myself. In my enthusiasm I forgot about Sladen's treachery. I had no further ambition than to be left alone with the skulls for a year, to trace out the evolution of those ancient tribes, and then to collate the results in a monograph.

"Sladen, however, expressed a desire to return to Europe, and make an announcement to the Royal Society. When I reminded him that, after all, he was my paid servant, and that he owed me loyalty, he dropped the pose he had adopted for so long, and boldly declared that the discovery was his, and that he did not intend even to share it with me.

"A few nights later, I found him packing up the skulls preparatory to a secret flight. He would have got away, I am convinced, had it not been for the sudden appearance of Dusi Khan. This man, an educated Egyptian, is chief of a great African political society. He accused us of treasure hunting, and robbery of a sacred building.

"I was in a very peculiar position. The Egyptian has tremendous influence over the natives of Africa; I had known of the existence of this society for many years, and had traced its activities as far south as Rhodesia. That he would employ extreme measures to prevent our escaping with the skulls I had no doubt. Choosing the lesser of two evils, I took Sladen into my confidence once more, and secured his promise that in the interests of science he would help me to reach Europe.

"In order to mislead Dusi Khan, we set off in a northerly direction, as if it were our intention to reach Khartoum. Then we turned about and struck out across-country for Lake Tanganyika. It was a terrible journey, as the Egyptian soon got on our trail. Had it not been that I chose my route through the territory of tribes who knew me and were friendly, we should certainly have been murdered.

"We reached Kilwa, on the coast of German East Africa, a day before the outbreak of war. We chartered an Arab dhow to make the voyage to Zanzibar. But Dusi Khan arrived at Kilwa a few hours after we had left, and informed the Germans that we were spies. All this time Sladen had acted faithfully. I began to think that his moral lapse at El Khazar had been the result of temporary insanity, brought on by over-enthusiasm.

"Late in the afternoon of the second day of the voyage, we were caught in a storm of unusual severity, and our dhow was driven before the wind until, on trying to enter the sheltered lagoon of Thunder Island, a small uninhabited island just south of Mafia, it struck a reef and sank. We had a small boat in tow. The Swahili captain reached it, and later rescued Sladen and two surviving members of the crew. Meanwhile I hung on to a piece of wreckage and shouted to Sladen.

"It was a splendid opportunity for him, a splendid chance it was for a man who valued honour and gratitude as nothing. He left me there to drown. A lucky wave, however, tore me from my wreckage and washed me into shallow water on the reef. I swam across the lagoon to the island. I was rescued later by a small German patrol boat. They kept me a prisoner till the end of the war, but by that time repeated attacks of malaria had burnt out my constitution, and robbed me of my sight.

"I returned to England six months ago to find that Sladen had escaped, that he had announced his discovery of the ruins of El Khazar, telling all except the secret of the tomb of skulls. Beyond a

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doubt it was his intention to salve them from the dhow when the end of the war permitted.

"Cleveland, so far as I know, the dhow is still lying in shallow water on the reefs of Thunder Island. According to the natives, the island itself is haunted; no one will live there. The forty skulls were packed in a double air-tight steel case. I am going to get them. You are going to help me? I'm blind, helpless——"

"Rather, sir," I cried with enthusiasm; "I'm game for anything—but——"

"We must have a diver, of course," he interrupted. "I can engage one at Durban, but I would like you to have a knowledge of the business yourself, if it were possible. You have had experience at sea?"

"Not of diving, sir, but I've no doubt I could learn."

"Splendid," he cried, "you're the very man. Sladen is dead. The woman you passed on the corridor, and her rascal of a brother who is now in prison, are his sole surviving relatives, she is his niece. She came here with a preposterous story. She accused me of robbing her uncle, of stealing from a dead man. Sladen kept the secret of the dhow until his death-bed, then, apparently, he was too exhausted to give a description of the island. But he would know its name. He told her of the case and mentioned me. He died two days after it was announced that I was alive. Death alone saved him from justice. The woman says she will fit out an expedition herself."

"What about Dusi Khan, sir?" I asked.

"I heard no more of him after leaving Kilwa. Doubtless he made a swift return to Egypt, for no matter how anti-British his feelings were he had no love for the Germans. A very clever man he is. He'd fool anyone. And dangerous too. He's doing a lot of harm in Africa, a lot of harm he's doing.

"Now, we must discuss the matter of salary. I am not a poor man. I can offer you fifteen pounds a week, all expenses, and a cheque for £200 when the skulls are mine. Would that be agreeable?"

"Rather, sir," I replied. "When do you intend starting?"

"At once," he answered, "as soon as you are ready. There must be no delay. You'd better come here to-morrow morning. Apart from personal equipment, there is little wanted save the diving apparatus. That we can arrange at Durban or Zanzibar. But I would like you to get some practice, if possible. I will give you a cheque for equipment now. Don't stint yourself, old boy. Comfort is everything in the Tropics, everything it is. Leave the commissariat to me. I'll have a few cases of whisky packed up. Champagne, too, and tobacco. Let me have a list of what you want. You will come round in the morning? Ten o'clock—it is a good hour to begin work."

We stood up from our chairs.

"Just one more, Cleveland." I poured out another tot and placed the glass in his hand. "Drink with me to—the forty skulls."

Was there ever a stranger toast? I thought,

as I put the glass to my lips, of poor old dad and his letter. "A safe and splendid future," and here was I in the queerest of company, drinking to the forty skulls, to Romance and Adventure, to a life as opposite to that which my fond parent had designed for me as the East is from the West.

"We'll find them, sir," I cried, with an enthusiasm that was but partly due to the home-made spirit.

"I don't doubt it," he said, "not for a minute. You'll be here at ten, old boy," as I walked to the door. "Good night, good—night, old fellow. It has been a great pleasure meeting you. Given me new life it has. Find your way out all right, won't you? Good night—ten o'clock. Good-bye, old fellow."

As I passed the lift-gates my whirling thoughts suddenly stopped at the memory of the girl I had seen. Her eyes—what a wonderful colour they were, what a depth of meaning they had conveyed to me in those brief seconds. A she-devil, a thief? No, by Jove, those were the eyes of a good woman. Strength, determination, temper, battle, allurements if you like—yes, even devil, and good luck to it; but nothing dishonourable was written there. Her uncle had evidently misled her. She could have little idea of his treachery, his duplicity. And she was going to fit out an expedition to hunt for the forty skulls. . . .

I fumbled for the latch of the door, opened it—and stepped out almost into the arms of a man who was standing close to the doorway.

"I beg your pardon, sir," I cried.

"Do not speak of it, *m's'r*," he replied. "My own

fault entirely. Could you inform me—is this the residence of Docterre Maclintock? I am shortsighted. I cannot read the plates so well in the fog.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know,” I answered, carefully, for a quick glance to the stranger’s face had acquainted me with the important fact that his nationality was Egyptian.

CHAPTER II

THE DEAD EGYPTIAN

I COULD hardly sleep that night for thinking of old Flint, his forty skulls, and the adventure I had given my hand to, and at the first sign of daylight I was dressed and downstairs at such an unusual hour that Miss Parkins, the thin, dyspeptic proprietress of the hotel, hurriedly made out my bill to date, and brought it in so anxiously that she forgot her hair was in curling-pins. I borrowed a copy of *Who's Who* from her, and looked up Wallace Flint.

He had not deceived me as to his career ; there was nearly half a page of it—distinguished anthropologist and explorer, authority on tropical poisons, diseases of the brain, author of many books and contributions to scientific journals—several degrees and other letters after his name. . Nothing about the last expedition, of course, but then the book was ten years old. And very little about Professor Sladen, yet enough to remove my last doubt of the honesty of Flint's astounding narrative.

At ten o'clock precisely I presented myself at No. 242. The doctor welcomed me as effusively as he had done the previous evening, yet I thought there was a hint of sadness in his voice as he bade me sit down and help myself to tobacco.

"It's a terrible thing, is blindness," he began,

"a terrible thing it is to be cut away from your best friends. Baxter reads to me, but he has a poor, weak mind. Oh, he's awful, makes me furious he does. Would you be so kind, at the end of the second shelf there, *Diana of the Crossways*. Do you know it, my boy? Incomparable it is, incomparable. Read it to me, just a little; I know you'll enjoy it."

Such was the queer beginning of what I thought was to be a very momentous interview. I had come with my mind full of the expedition, prepared to discuss details connected with equipment, diving apparatus, arms, steamer berths, and yet here I found myself reading George Meredith aloud, like a schoolboy to his tutor.

But Dr. Flint was in the best of humours when I had finished a chapter.

"Ah, my dear Cleveland," he cried, "you make me forget my blindness. There is no joy in the world to compare with literature. Good writing is the supremest art. Press the bell, will you? You'll have a little coffee?"

Baxter, a man whose face reminded me of an advertisement for patent pills, came in and placed a tray on the table between us. He coughed nervously.

"Anything else, sir?" The doctor did not reply, and he retired as quietly as he had come.

"An ex-Civil Service clerk," said my employer, as if he felt that some explanation was necessary.

"What can you expect?"

I poured out the coffee.

"And now, my dear Cleveland, let us get to business. First of all, I must tell you of a most unusual occurrence that took place this morning at an early hour. A most unusual occurrence it was. Open that door there on your left——"

I did as I was told, exposing what was evidently the old man's sleeping chamber.

"You will notice almost opposite my bed, just above the safe, a window looking on to a small enclosed yard. The window is an old-fashioned one. An ordinary sash. However, it is fitted with an electric alarm of my own design. At two o'clock this morning, the alarm was set in action. I got out, crept along the floor very quietly, and made the discovery that someone was trying to get into the room. My nerves are not too good, Cleveland. I was shaken, considerably upset I was. But I knew what I wanted. You see the little spear there on my dressing-table?"

It was a short iron rod furnished with a crude barbed point, less formidable, you would think, than an arrow.

"I got that spear from a pigmy chief. The point has been dipped in a powerful vegetable toxin, the origin and precise nature of which I never traced. Its effect is peculiar, causing almost instant death with the largest bovidæ and apes. Its fatal action on human beings, however, is withheld several hours. I took it down from the wall, and then, more confident, I crept to the window and put my hand right on the fellow's arm, which was reaching in. It was a thin muscular arm, lightly clad. I drove the spear into it."

"Good God," I exclaimed in horror, "then you killed him?"

The doctor continued calmly, as if we were discussing a problem in anatomy or literature.

"Death would not occur for several hours. One must remember, too, the poison may have lost some of its virulence. It is difficult to say, extremely difficult. I think that he fell some distance. Evidently he got away. I was afraid of something of the sort happening, my boy. We must be prepared for action on the part of our enemies."

I was suddenly reminded of the Egyptian I had seen last night. Could it be the same man? I described him.

"Dusi Khan," the doctor replied as coolly as before, "certainly it was he. The French accent—he was educated in Paris, I believe. A most determined man. He has many friends—many influential friends. He may still think it was treasure that Sladen and I carried away from the tombs. He will do his utmost. But there—we are more than a match for such men as he."

Thinking of the spear, I agreed.

"I have had a very busy morning," he continued, as though the matter had no more interest for him. "You will be pleased to hear that I have secured two berths on the *Bulford Castle*, leaving Southampton a week to-morrow—via the Cape. That will not give you too much time."

A moment's thought, and I suggested that I should run up to Whiteport that afternoon, spend the next two days getting diving practice, if possible, pack up my guns and tropical kit, now at home, and

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return to London on Tuesday, the day before we sailed.

"Excellent," he said. "Baxter can do for me all that is required in the way of packing. He will come with me to the boat. I'd like you to accept a cheque, old fellow. I'd like you to do yourself well. And now I'm sure you want to get away. Write to me when you've time; I'd like to know how you're getting on."

He gave me a cheque for twenty pounds, and after I'd helped myself to another cigar, I went.

I confess frankly it was with a sense of relief that I found myself out in the street again, with the bustle of my fellow-creatures about me.

During the last half-dozen years I had led a rough enough life, had learned to regard danger, and even death, almost with indifference, but there was something in the cold scientific way in which the doctor had described the spearing of his burglar that was, to say the least of it, discomfoting. Had he shot him with a pistol, I don't think it would have worried me. That, as the papers say, would have been justifiable homicide, but a poisoned spear, no—it wasn't nice.

At Oxford Circus I bought an early race edition of the *Evening Globe*, and my eyes went by instinct to the stop press column. Good Lord!—

"Early this morning in the Strand, an Egyptian gentleman, identified now as a student at King's College, was seen to collapse on the pavement outside Fragatti's restaurant. He was at once removed to Charing Cross Hospital, but death had

supervened. In the man's forearm, roughly bandaged, was a deep wound that could not possibly have been self-inflicted. A complete burglar's outfit was found on the body."

Beyond a doubt, here was the sequel to the doctor's nocturnal adventure. The poisoned spear had done its awful work. For a second or two, I felt sick. What should I do? Go back to the doctor and ask him to release me from my contract? But he had acted in self-defence. An old, blind man, what chance would he have had against a determined opponent? Yet I did not like this poison business. . . .

Very uneasy of mind, and with a firm resolve that I would have a clear understanding with my employer upon the matter of lethal weapons, I decided to say nothing. I rang him up, however, and told him that if he would send Baxter out for a copy of the *Evening Globe*, he would find something of professional interest therein. He thanked me for my thoughtfulness, saying that he had already obtained a copy of the paper, and that Baxter had read to him a most interesting paragraph dealing with recently discovered Egyptian remains.

A grim jest, I thought, as I rang off, but it served to show me that the situation was not altogether devoid of humour.

I left for Whiteport that afternoon, and arrived at Heddon Towers for dinner. The governor was pleased to see me, but when I told him the reason of my coming he stiffened up like an angry boar-

hound. He called me a fool, an ingrate, a potential prodigal, and if it had not been for the dear old mater, I believe he would have turned me out of the house. Later, however, I got him into the billiard-room, let him give me thirty in a hundred up and win, and before we went to bed he had calmed down to such an extent that he promised to pay off the last item of my account with the Scott-Hemery Aircraft Company, the builders of my unfortunate London to Cape Town aeroplane, and to give me an introduction to the manager of the North Sea Salvage Co. in Whiteport.

The next four days I spent at the Salvage Company's works and acquired a very fair knowledge of diving with the ordinary equipment. If Dr. Flint was right in his assumption that the dhow was sunk in comparatively shallow water, I was confident of tackling the job myself with every prospect of success.

Margaret Stoneham came to dinner the evening before I returned to town. She looked very beautiful. I quite saw the Governor's point of view, that she would make a splendid wife. I don't suppose he would ever see mine, that I should make a very bad husband. Margaret's fault is that she's just too splendid, and so very painfully efficient. She can ride, shoot, play billiards, tennis, and golf, and bridge, sing like a *prima donna*, act, cook, run a hospital or a house-party. There is no subject in the world that she can't discuss with more intelligence than you can yourself, from Russian plays to the fossils of the carboniferous limestone. Margaret will some day run away with her father's

butler, and have a very large family, which is Nature's way of levelling things.

I went up to Cavendish Square on Tuesday afternoon. The doctor was as happy as a child away on its first holiday to the seaside. He insisted on our toasting, in that remarkable spirit of his, the success of the expedition.

I was feeling worried about the dead Egyptian, however, and I broached the subject at the first opportunity. The old man passed me a copy of *The Times* and, with a soft chuckle, asked me to turn to page eight. There was a paragraph under the heading "Strand Mystery, Famous Toxicologist's Opinion." At his request I read it aloud.

"Although the police are still baffled by the mystery of the Egyptian student who fell dead in the Strand a week ago, it is announced that the nature of the poison has been determined by Dr. Wallace Flint, the famous toxicologist and African explorer, who was consulted on the matter. In his opinion it is of vegetable origin, identical with that used by certain Central African tribes to tip their spears and arrows.

"Undoubtedly it was introduced into the unfortunate man's system by means of the weapon that caused the puncture on his arm. This would lend weight to the theory that the murder was carried out at the instigation of some foreign secret society which the man had probably offended. Dr. Flint, it will be recollected, recently returned from German East Africa, where, as a prisoner of war, he suffered terrible hardships. He is now totally blind."

"Good heavens, sir," I cried in alarm, "but isn't that awfully risky?"

"Why, my dear boy, why? Nothing is more puzzling to an investigator than the truth that is near the truth. That is in this case the truth indeed." He paused while I put a match to his cigar.

"Besides, what does it all amount to? The man came here with the intention of finding plans and other documents that he believed to exist. It shows us that he was not aware of the exact locality of the sunken dhow. I have learnt from my own agents in Zanzibar that the three native survivors died a few days after their arrival. Possibly my late colleague, Dr. Ernest Sladen, had arranged their diet. He was full of resource, full of resource he was. Perhaps they talked a little before they died. I think Dusi Khan was bound to know that the dhow did founder, and that the steel case went down with it. We must congratulate ourselves that Dusi Khan is dead."

For nearly an hour we discussed the final plans for our departure, and then, as I had several calls to make, I prepared to go.

"Ten o'clock, my boy," he said as I rose. "You might get to the station early and buy tickets. Reserve a couple of seats. I like to be comfortable. Good-bye, old fellow, good-bye."

Scorning the lift, I ran down the stairs to the door, and there, talking angrily to the lift-man, was the lady I had seen a week before, Sladen's niece. Evidently she wanted to go up, for the lift-man turned to me with relief.

"This gentleman will tell you the same thing, miss. The doctor won't see no one without an appointment."

"Are you connected with Dr. Flint in any way, please?" she inquired, looking straight at me with those perturbing eyes of hers.

"Yes," I replied, "I'm his—er—secretary. I'm afraid the man's right. Dr. Flint has given emphatic orders that no one is to go up. Perhaps I can help you."

The lift-man had discreetly turned away. We were alone.

"I don't see how you can," she said, "unless you can help me to see him. I wasn't aware that he had a secretary. I wonder how long you have been with him?"

"Quite long enough to know that I should lose my—appointment if I helped you to carry out your wishes."

"What is your name, please?" she asked abruptly.

Her tone nettled me. What the dickens had that to do with her? I thought hard to find some crushing remark that would show this presumptive lady that she wasn't talking to the lift-man now. But one's resource invariably fails one on occasions like these. I simply told her, coldly, very coldly.

"Captain Cleveland?" she echoed. "Oh, not the Cleveland whose aeroplane was crashed at Luxor, in the Cape Town flight?"

"Yes, the same," I answered, still coldly.

"Oh," and her voice sounded kinder. "Then you know Major Darling? he was your passenger, of course. How strange. And you are now

secretary to Dr. Flint. What an extraordinary coincidence. Perhaps—yes, I should like to speak to you. Will you walk across the square with me? "

We stepped outside, crossed the road, and walked slowly along the opposite pavement. She was not so tall as I had first thought, but her figure was straight and slim.

"Of course I remember you now," she continued. "I passed you in the corridor the last time I was here. I wonder if you know Dr. Flint very well. Have you been with him long? "

I hesitated, and she added quickly :

"You must think me very rude, but I'm sure you don't realise— " She caught my eye again and hesitated as though uncertain of her ground, and then, as swift as an arrow : "When are you leaving for Africa? "

I was so taken aback by the embarrassing directness of her question that I nearly blurted out the truth.

"You seem to be very conversant with my affairs," I answered stiffly, yet painfully aware that by my hesitating manner I had told her what she really wanted to know.

"I'm simply guessing," she remarked coolly. We stopped at the corner of the square. "Captain Cleveland, I know you are a gentleman. I am going to be frank with you. Dr. Flint is a very wicked man. He is trying to steal something that rightly belongs to me. Please stop that taxi for me." I waved my hand, and the driver applied his brakes and turned.

"I give you credit for not knowing what he

really is—what you are undertaking to do on his behalf. It is mean—dishonest. If you are a gentleman you will break your engagement with him at once, and go no further.”

The cab drew up, and the driver descended and opened the door.

She gave an address in Knightsbridge and got in. Then leaning out of the window, she said :

“ I should like so much to talk to you again. Could you meet me at lunch to-morrow ? ”

“ I—I’m afraid——”

“ Oh, of course.” She added swiftly : “ The *Bulford Castle* sails to-morrow at two. May I wish you a successful voyage ? ”

She leaned back smiling. The cab moved—and then as I turned I noticed a man standing not ten yards away, lighting a cigarette. It was the Egyptian I had seen outside the doctor’s house that fateful night a week ago.

CHAPTER III

CABIN NO. 37

THE man walked past me, and although I stared at him hard he made no sign of recognition. Yet I was certain it was the same man I had bumped into—whom the doctor by my description had identified as Dusi Khan. Then who on earth was it who had attempted to burgle the flat?—who had fallen dead in the Strand?

Had he overheard what the girl had said to me?

Oh, what a blundering fool I had been! She had pumped me as though I had been a child of six. She now knew as much about my plans as I did myself—and what was worse, she had unwittingly caused them to be known to the other searcher for the forty skulls.

The more I thought over the matter the clearer did I see how she had deliberately set out to gain information. Of course she had guessed, but it was quite reasonable for her to suppose that Flint did intend fitting out an expedition to find the forty skulls, and that I, because of my African experience and his infirmity, should accompany him. Because of her own possible preparations she would be familiar with the sailings of the African boats.

I had hesitated when she had asked me to lunch—the *Bulford Castle* remark was a well-timed shot.

Conscience prompted me to return to the doctor without delay, and tell him precisely what had happened—but so bitter was my shame that I postponed my confession until I reached the Army and Navy Club, where I had a luncheon engagement. Then I rang him up. On the whole he took things kindly, but he did not spare the lady's character. I had to beware of her—she was an adventuress of the very worst type—her beauty was a snare. It was unfortunate that the man we thought had gone away on a long voyage was still in London. The fact that he had overheard a chance remark was not important. It was important, however, that I should be on my guard against such a cunning adventuress as the lady named, which advice—I thought as I rang off—was entirely unnecessary. I had learnt my lesson, and if by chance I did meet her again she would not find me the simple fool I had been on the last occasion.

The man who had asked me to lunch was late, and I went back to the lounge and picked up a paper; but scarcely had I glanced at it when who should come and clap me very heartily on the shoulder but Major Darling, his right arm still in a sling as a reminder of our unfortunate crash.

"Dear old Cleveland," he cried, "fancy meeting you! Thought you had signed on as an apprentice to your dad. You look quite worried! Still thinking of the £10,000 we didn't win? Have a drink."

I answered the more important of his questions in the affirmative, and then, after we'd talked a little shop I began a few tactful inquiries. He didn't know much about Professor Sladen, but when I discreetly dropped a hint about relatives, information poured from his lips.

"Why, I'd have thought you'd have known Pat Howard. A priceless girl, one of the best, I used to know her awfully well before; but surely you remember her brother—the stores scandal——?"

It appeared that her brother had been mixed up in one of those unfortunate misappropriation of army fund cases; was convicted and sent to prison. His father, a Colonel in the Indian Army, had made good half the deficit by selling his estates, and had died of shame and a broken heart. Pat had been left penniless, and she had cut the old circle of friends and taken a position somewhere as a nurse, until her uncle, on his death-bed, sent for her. Darling had often tried to trace her, without success.

"She has an awful pride, you know, the scandal must have broken her. Charlie is quite a decent sort in his way. A fool. Unmoral rather than immoral. I'll bet that her one idea in life now is to wipe off the rest of that deficit. You haven't heard of her by any chance?"

Luckily my friend arrived just at this juncture, and I was saved the fatigue of further invention.

* * * * *

Although convinced that Miss Howard's idea of

the doctor's character was a greatly exaggerated one, I am bound nevertheless to confess that his temper was very trying. We struck bad weather the first day out, and he would not stir from his cabin, but lay in his bunk all day and night, using the most appalling language to anyone who went near. The stewards were afraid of him. I was myself, although I found I could always put him into a moderately good humour if I read to him. I think the chief trouble was that because of his sickness he could not smoke or drink.

After Madeira, the sea was calm, and he came on deck. The sun acted as a powerful tonic to his jaded nerves, and he was soon his cheery old self again, verbose perhaps, cynical, dogmatic, but ever entertaining. I could sit for hours listening to his African experiences, for he always seemed to have observed things from a totally different standpoint to that of the usual traveller.

The evening we crossed the line the passengers gave a grand concert and, as is usual, the second-class passengers were admitted to the performance. I sing myself, being possessed of a somewhat melancholy baritone, and in a moment of folly I allowed my name to be put on the programme. Wisely (the chief steward possibly arranged it) my item closed the first half, after which a rush is made for the bar.

I forget what the song was, probably something about an old English garden with nightingales singing in the elms, but I do remember that as soon as I got up on the platform I found my eyes staring

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straight at that confounded Egyptian, who was standing against a ventilator barely ten yards away.

I was not encored.

When the interval came I went straight to the second-class steward and made inquiries. My description agreed exactly with that of a Mr. Achmed Ali, the representative of an Egyptian tobacco firm. He had secured his passage at the very last moment, the steward remembered, for he had experienced difficulty in finding him a berth. He was bound for Zanzibar according to the markings on his luggage, but of course, like the rest of us, he would have to change boats at Durban, the destination of the *Bulford Castle*.

I believe the steward thought I was a detective, for he refused my tip the first time I offered it to him. He took it the second time, however, with that delightful embarrassment which is so typical of your modern independent seafaring landsman.

The doctor was in his bunk, and I acquainted him with the news. It did not appear to excite him in the least, and, after I had read aloud a few pages from Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, he fell asleep and I went up on deck. The concert was over. It was a fine night, the sea calm and phosphorescent, the sky starry and clear of cloud. A week ago I had been dreaming of a night like this. But now I was conscious only of a sense of irritation. I wanted to ask the people who walked sailor fashion to and fro to keep still or go down to their cabins, to tell the fluffy girl

flirting with the third engineer by the boat derrick that I knew for certain the man was married and had a dozen children.

What was the matter with me? Surely I was not becoming nervous about the expedition! I will not deny that I was worried about Mr. Dusi Khan, for he and Achmed Ali were undoubtedly the same. It could not possibly be coincidence that found him now on the same boat as ourselves bound for the same destination. Why was the doctor so unperturbed? Surely the Egyptian was here with the ultimate object of defeating us in our efforts to secure the skulls.

Well, the doctor could do what he liked, but my idea of warfare is to carry it into the enemy's camp, to bomb him on his own aerodrome, and I resolved that Dusi Khan and I would quickly have an understanding with one another.

We arrived at Durban on the last day of January, and, as the Zanzibar boat did not leave for a week, we took rooms at the Marine Hotel close to the harbour. The doctor and I had friends in the town. Through an old hospital colleague of the doctor's an interview was arranged with the Natal Navigation Company. It produced, in addition to the hired loan of a complete modern diving equipment, a diver as well—Jacob Timms, or more correctly, Captain Jacob Timms, for he quickly had us know that he was no ordinary diver, but that he had forsaken the bridge of a "ruddy fine ship, sir," for a profession that put him in greater intimacy with a particular enemy of his, one Davy Jones. At the doctor's suggestion we announced to whom

it was necessary to give an explanation, that we were embarking on a biological expedition to search for certain marine animals of great scientific interest. Timms was the very man for such a job, so we gathered from what he told us ; for he had followed this second profession of his for over twenty years. He had walked the sea bottom on the coasts of China, South America, Scotland and Alaska. He knew the bed of the River Thames from South-end Pier to London Bridge. He had dived for Spanish galleons, sunken mines, sewer stoppages, Brazilian diamonds and pearls, and a diving-suit was to him "as nat'ral as the scales is to an 'errin'."

He was very big, with a chest like a buffalo's, and his face spoke of a life that had been lived. The only decent feature in it was his eyes, which twinkled humorously, for his nose was red and bulbous, and an ugly weal slanted across his forehead, curved at the left eyebrow and disappeared in the tangle of a grisly beard. We were very lucky to get his services, he assured us when we discussed the delicate matter of salary. He had just completed a three years' contract with the company, and he would have been aboard the next boat bound for Australia. His wife, apparently, lived at Brixton.

The doctor was delighted at our good fortune. To hear him talking of the skulls, you would think they were already packed inside his trunks, and that we were on our way to England.

"My boy," he said to me the evening of our fixing up with Timms, "this will be a great triumph for

ne, a stupendous triumph. The scientific world will be amazed when my monograph is published, and the skulls, examined and measured with meticulous care by these hands of mine, are produced as evidence. Evidence undeniable, they will be irrefutable. No one can challenge me. . . . You got the berths all right, old boy?" he added.

I had just come up from the shipping office.

"Yes, sir, for the three of us. I also discovered that the Egyptian will be on the same boat."

"Yes, yes," said he, with as much apparent interest as if I had made some futile remark about the weather. "I thought he would be. A most persistent rascal, most determined he is. It would be an advantage to us if he were dead, save us a lot of trouble it would."

"But what can one do?" he added regretfully. "We must avoid all legal complications; it would embarrass us considerably at this juncture."

I forget what reply I made, for the doctor's words had given me an idea. "Legal complication." By jove, if a legal complication of a vastly different sort could not be arranged, my friendship with Nick Priestman, late of the Rhodesian Police and Army Intelligence Corps, and now, as I learnt from him yesterday, a very important officer of the South African C.I.D., was not worth having. Why, Nick was the special staff observer who was with me that time we bombed the Huns from Ngonda Hill, and later discovered from the air the wicked line of concealed trenches which came so near to

spoiling that splendid attack of the King's African Rifle Brigade. It was Nick, the same ever fortunate and brainy Nick, who in one night's play brought the whole of my squadron to bankruptcy, relieved me of a thousand silver rupees and finished up by playing us for our cellar, and sent the General's car down next day to collect it!

He had a bungalow on the Berea, and I rang him up. He was in, and would be delighted if I'd come round at once and take pot luck. I explained to the doctor that I was dining out, and a quarter of an hour later Nick was regaling me with Martini cocktails, and the latest South African scandal—scandal, next to diamonds, being the most important produce of South Africa.

He gave me an excellent dinner, and we took our coffee and liqueur on to the *stoep*.

"You seem to have struck a dashed fine job," I said after we had sat awhile, gently turning the conversation from reminiscence and gossip to the matter I had in mind. "Interesting?"

"Bet your life, old thing, always something doing, perhaps not quite so exciting as flying, but——"

"More remunerative, I should hope. What do you deal with chiefly?"

"I.D.B.'s," he answered, "but there's no shortage of ordinary crime in South Africa. Got a murderer here the other day."

"Really," I replied, with an interest that was almost professional. "Have you run up against the Bolshevik tribe at all?"

"Rather. As a matter of fact that's why I'm

here. They're running the Rand mines for all they're worth—Jo'burg's full of 'em. Come out mostly via America. . . . Why the interest, old thing?" he added.

"I'll tell you," I said, "for I'm going to ask you to help me out of a pretty nasty hole——"

The dear old fellow was on his feet in a moment, his hand in mine.

"I don't forget things, Cleveland," he said.

"It's very decent of you, Nick," I answered, feeling a little conscience stricken. "Anyway, the fact of it is, I've got mixed up with one of these beastly political societies. I can't give you a single detail. All I can tell you is I've been followed out to Durban by one of the chief men of the society, and that I learn now that he's in the same boat for Zanzibar. I'm in a very peculiar position. In the ordinary way I'd knock the fellow's head off and be damned to him—but—but——" Words for the moment failed me, for I was near to breaking faith with the doctor. "Please don't think I'm in danger of my life or anything like that; but, the truth is, I've got a scheme on—this man's out to spoil it."

"An honest scheme, Cleveland?" he asked—his eyes slanting.

"Perfectly, you have my word for that."

"I believe you, old thing. Not that I'd mind personally if it wasn't, but I reckon you want me to help you more or less in my official capacity."

"Exactly. This is my plan. Mr. Achmed Ali, *alias* Dusi Khan, has booked a passage on the

Scottish Chief, sailing at midnight to-morrow for Zanzibar. There can be no doubt but that he is a criminal. I know positively that he is guilty of attempted murder, but of course that is insufficient evidence for a policeman. If I can in some way—er—prevent——”

Nick laughed at my hesitation.

“ You’d like me to arrest him, what ? ”

“ It would be an infinite relief to me, I’ll admit, but that’s not quite my idea. I simply want him to miss the boat. It occurred to me that you might have on your list of wanted men someone who resembled him. It’s a jolly big thing to ask, but—er—a case of mistaken identity is not an unheard-of thing in the history of the C.I.D., is it ? ”

He gave me a lightning, comprehensive look.

“ That’s a smart idea, Cleveland,” he said slowly, “ very smart, ’pon my word, quite Rafflesian. Now tell me,” he continued after a moment’s silence, “ what is your friend like.”

I described him to the best of my ability.

“ Of course,” I added, “ I don’t expect you to hold him a moment after the boat has sailed, and I can assure you that he daren’t make any fuss.”

“ Help yourself to whisky, old thing,” he answered. “ I’m just going to get through to my people—won’t be a minute.”

He came back smiling.

“ Thought I was right. We’ve got no less than three Egyptians on the Home Office list—two of ’em fugitives from Cairo, connected with anti-

British plots. The other one's mixed up with illicit diamond traffic. One of the first, at any rate, might, by the stretch of an ordinary policeman's imagination, be mistaken for your man. Strange enough he's been traced to London. Almost think we might help you. Certain he won't make a fuss? I should hate to get any of my pals into a hole?"

"Certain," I replied, with absolute conviction.

We smoked for a while and then he gave me his answer.

"I'll do it, old thing—and damn the consequences."

"And now," he continued, after I had enthusiastically expressed my gratitude, "let's talk business. You say his cabin number is 37. The boat leaves the quay at midnight. She'll do it punctually, from what I know of the port officials. At ten minutes to twelve I'll have a launch on the off side of the ship. It's doubtful if I can get down myself, but three of our best white police in plain clothes will be there. They will do the job quickly, and I'll instruct one of 'em to report to you when he's safely handcuffed and away. The rest you can leave to me. One thing is certain, he can't get to Zanzibar for a fortnight at the outside."

"It is really topping of you, Nick," I cried gratefully.

"Not at all, but mind you call at Durban on your way back when your little—er—job's over, and your pocket's lined with notes. I'll arrange some poker——"

When Nick dies and goes to heaven, he'll be playing the angels for their harps.

* * * * *

The doctor and I went on board the *Scottish Chief* during the afternoon. There was no sign of Captain Timms, but a shrewd intuition and a knowledge of the ways of a seafaring man on shore guided me to a well-known public-house, where I found him delivering an address on the colour problem to an interested audience consisting of the Goanese barman and a very corpulent Malayan lady.

"What I says is this," said he, laying his great hairy fist on the counter, "What I says is this, and 'oo the 'ell 'ere will dispute it! White is white an' black is black—an' East is East an' West is West. Water an' oil won't mix—you can keep 'em in the same bottle for a year an' they won't. What I says to you, lady, and I asks yer pardon for the liberty of speech, what I says to you, is that you're water and I'm oil. Now I don't say as there's anyfing wrong wiv water, 'an I don't says there's anyfin' particularly good about oil—an' I won't say as oil will always mix wiv oil—there bein' considerable difference in the natur' o' similar fluids. But oil's oil, and water's water, and so for Gawd's sake, Flossie, slip the tarpaulin's orf those ear'oles o' yours and listen! I don't want no bloomin' melodrama wiv you. Yer a fine young gel, 'an yer ole life's before you. You might do well wiv all that money you pinched out 'o' me pockets last night, if you was to turn over a new leaf. What you wants is convertin', yer a lorst soul, a blasted 'eathen——"

He paused for breath and further lubrication, and I took the opportunity of suggesting that he might like to see his cabin on the *Scottish Chief*. He replied that he was very anxious indeed to be on board, would like nothing better, but his anchor had fouled. What could he do? The good lady was now in tears, howling infernally. Suddenly inspired, Timms filled up her glass with Cape brandy, and stroked her perspiring shoulders.

"'Ere yer are, little orange blossom. Moisten yer pretty lips wiv this . . . that's the way—slowly, slowly for the sake o' yer digestion. Gawd, but you must 'ave 'ad a thirst." She had swallowed it at one draught.

"Now just you stay 'ere, while me an' the gentleman goes and buys you some wiolets. What, yer'd like another? No, Flossie, yer mustn't. Ain't you got no shame at all? What! only a thirst? Well, well, there's worse things 'n that. Give 'er another, George, an' look after my little girl when I'm gone, won't you?" He tipped me the wink, and another moment I had him in the car, *en route* for the harbour. Captain Timms had shipped his cable.

* * * * *

Dusi Khan came on board about half-past eight, alone, and carrying a small suit-case. Evidently he had been staying in the town. The doctor, to whom I gave no inkling of my plot, turned in early, and I sat in the smoke-room, reading, until twenty minutes to twelve, when I went out on deck. The night was dark, but I could see, lying close to the stern of an adjacent tramp, a small motor-launch.

At ten minutes to twelve I saw the launch come alongside. Three men climbed up a rope-ladder amidships and disappeared over the second-class deck railing. I waited, my heart thumping wildly in my chest.

Would he escape them, I wondered? He was a determined man, I knew. Could it be possible that—— A dark figure appeared at the ladder head, climbed down a couple of rungs and waited; a second figure followed, moving gingerly, clumsily, like someone unacquainted with ships, then a third. The three moved slowly down to the boat. . . .

Four minutes to twelve.

The Captain was on the bridge shouting orders. *Three men* only, then they hadn't got him. What could have happened?

Then came the sound of footsteps moving along the deck. A tall, clean-shaven man appeared, hesitated as he caught sight of me, and came up.

"Excuse me, sir, Captain Cleveland?"

"Yes, rather," I replied excitedly.

"Major Priestman asked me to report to you, sir. We've got the man all right, not the slightest doubt of his identity. I believe that's all, sir—the launch is waiting for me."

"Yes, yes, that's all," I cried, hardly able to disguise my exultation. "Thanks very much for coming up. Will you give my very best regards to the Major? Good night."

I watched him go down the ladder, and saw the launch disappear in the darkness. Almost

simultaneously the engine-bell rang, and the ship began to sheer off from the quay side. Dusi Khan and I had at last come to an understanding.

CHAPTER IV

WHAT HAPPENED IN ZANZIBAR

THE next morning after breakfast I helped the doctor up on deck (there was a fair swell), and when I had arranged his cushions and made him comfortable, I gave an account of my affair with Dusi Khan. He chortled with glee.

"Delighted, my boy, delighted I am. Thought I wasn't mistaken in you. Splendid, splendid. Makes me feel quite young again, it does. I'd have given a great deal to have seen his face when they arrested him. The rascal! Thought he was very clever, didn't he? My boy, we must not let the moment pass, we must be appropriate even in our literature. *The Wrong Box*? Ah! I thought you would like to read it to me. An incomparable story. You'll find it in my cabin."

I read to him for nearly an hour, and then, stiff with sitting, I lounged across to the railings. We were out of sight of land, but a school of porpoises gambolling near to the ship held my attention for a moment or two. One broke water within a yard of the ship's hull, and sent a shoal of flying fish into the air. I watched the spot with idle interest, and then suddenly became aware of two men leaning over the railings of the second-class deck immediately below me. They were talking earnestly. One I had

no difficulty in recognising as Captain Timms. He was smoking his filthy brier pipe and making occasional shots at an imaginary spittoon in the sea. The shape of the other man's shoulders seemed familiar, but it was not until, in obedience to a gesture of Captain Timms, he looked up towards the bridge wing, that I recognised him.

It was Dusi Khan.

Dusi Khan, the man whom I had fondly imagined to be cooling his heels in a Durban jail, or searching in vain for another passage, here on the same ship calmly talking to Captain Timms. How in the name of goodness had he escaped the C.I.D. ? Had they fooled me ? Surely Nick Priestman was not the man to lend a hand to a trick like that. Were Dusi and Timms working in collusion ? Throwing caution to the winds, I ran down to the second-class deck. By then, however, the captain was alone. He gave me a hearty greeting.

"Blimy, but you was a real good Samaritan to a pore sailor man, you was. A blinkin' hoctopus ain't in it wiv that there gel ! Pore little Flossie, she 'ad a good 'eart though, even if 'er morals was shockin' —even if she did pinch twenty quid from me pockets. What's wrong wiv that there gel is that she warn't brought up right. She never 'ad a chance, so to speak, only a thirst."

He flicked an imaginary tear from his eye and began to whistle "The Girl I Left Behind Me" with a pathos that his twinkling eyes belied. He stopped suddenly as he caught the puzzled expression on my face. What had Dusi told him ? Dare I risk everything by taking him to a certain degree into

our confidence and warn him against the Egyptian? Might he not be actually one of Dusi's agents? I regretted my folly in coming down without consulting the doctor.

"Maybe yer wantin' to talk wiv me, sir?"

"Well, yes, captain," I answered guardedly, "I saw you from the promenade deck, and the doctor was asking if you were fixed up all right."

"Gawd," he answered, "never bin so downy since I was skipper of the old *Cape Shad*. She *was* a boat. Don't know why I left 'er. But I was allus a rollin' stone. Never 'appy 'nless I was doin' somfing different to what I was. Ships was like women to me. Soon as I knew 'ow they sailed an' all their little tricks, why, I liked a new berth."

"This ought to be a nice little change for you?" I suggested.

"Not so dusty," he replied, re-charging his pipe with that infernal substance known as Transvaal tobacco, "not so dusty. Anyfing wiv a spice of fun and a spice of chance will do ter keep the barycles off the Cap'n's timbers. S'long as 'e gets 'is baccy, and an occasional drop o' whisky, 'e won't grumble. Lummie, look at ole King Pharaoh."

Dusi Khan had suddenly appeared at the saloon door, and, to my surprise, he came straight up to us, cool and smiling.

"Ah, excuse me, M'sieu," he said, "but have I not had the pleasure of meeting you before? Your face seems very familiar. I am sure that we met. Ah yes, was it not in Cavendish Square. You were kind enough to direct me to an address."

"Jove, yes!" I answered slowly, returning his stare, "I do remember now. And you were on the *Bulford Castle*. Extraordinary coincidence. A very small world though, isn't it."

This was the first chance I had of weighing him up. It is always a difficult matter to determine the age of an Oriental, but I put him down at thirty-eight or forty. He was tall and wiry, and his face was that of a typical cultured Egyptian of good breeding, very fair and handsome in a nasty sort of way.

He agreed with me that the world was small, and gave a few instances in his own experiences. Then suddenly he asked me if I had heard of the affair the previous evening as we were leaving port. Of course I had not, only the vaguest rumours. He laughed and lighted a scented cigarette.

"Very amusing it was, M'sieu, also a coincidence." I was certain that his eyes were mocking me. "I came on board about eight, went to my cabin, which was No. 37. There I found a fellow-countryman of mine, and one I had also met long ago in Cairo. He was connected with the tobacco business, like myself. The steward had confused the numbers and our names, but my friend was already unpacked. His cabin was 27, so we agreed to exchange. Then he was arrested!" He laughed. "Very tragic, was it not? I knew my friend was mixed up in some political society, but then"—he shrugged his shoulders like a Frenchman—"who in Egypt is not? As with your Irish fellow-countrymen, intrigue to us—well, we take it with our coffee and liqueurs."

"You'd have felt rather uncomfortable if they'd

arrested you in mistake though, wouldn't you?" I replied with a feeble attempt at irony.

"M'sieu, it would have been ruin. In Zanzibar I have most important business, and I must return to London by September. Possibly there would have been no boat for days. It would have been, yes, ruin."

At that moment the Marconi officer came up and handed me a message.

"You were fortunate," I said amiably, as I turned to go. "Even the African police are not infallible. You would not have been the first innocent man to be arrested, neither would your friend have been the first criminal to escape. . . . Perhaps we shall meet again, sir. Cheerio, captain, and don't think too much about Flossie."

But the captain was thinking of something far cooler, and he had disappeared into the saloon before I was half-way up the ladder.

The Marconigram, as I expected, was from Nick.

"Many thanks. Your bird, mine too."

Well, it's an ill wind that blows nobody good.

* * * * *

The doctor was very kind when I told him how my plot had failed.

"Don't worry, my boy, don't worry," he said, sensing my discomfiture. "Have a drink, old fellow, a little vermouth, an excellent tonic it is, excellent, excellent! Ah, we'll checkmate the rascal, never you fear."

"But what about Timms? Do you think——"

"Not at all, old fellow, not at all," he interrupted,

with unusual emphasis. "Our friend has many faults, many faults he has. I wouldn't trust him within a mile of my whisky, not within ten miles, I wouldn't. There are men who would do for liquor what they wouldn't do to save their own lives——"

"Then surely he is dangerous?"

"Yes, yes, if we permit him to be so. We must leave him alone. He knows nothing, therefore he cannot give more away than what the Egyptian already knows. All my plans are working splendidly, old fellow, splendidly they are. You will see when we get to Zanzibar, you will see that an old man may be blind, but not an imbecile. Ha, ha—a cigar, Cleveland, give me a cigar, old boy," and he chuckled so happily, that I began to be ashamed of my fears.

We crept into the anchorage of Zanzibar when the sun was lowering towards the sea, and the old white houses, and the forest of bending palms beyond were basking in the softened, kinder light that unlocks their colour, and reveals a beauty concealed in the glare of the tropical noon. The rich scent of clove and copra came out in the light land wind, and the sound of tom-toms and the babble of voices on the beach brought a rare satisfaction and delight to my heart, which only those who know the glamour of Africa will understand.

It is a wonderful thing, this glamour. Let it infect your blood and you are irrevocably lost. The yellow sunshine, the sight of blue hills quivering through the heat, the smell of the veldt after rain,

the throbbing of drums, the roaring of a lion, the tumult of the tropical storm, these are the germs that breed a fever that no doctor can cure, a fever that may lie dormant, until perchance a weakling ray of sunshine slanting down through the smoke of a London street, a patch of blue in a grey winter sea, the smell of incense in a church, will set it raging hot again. Then back you will go as certain as the rain falls to the mountain-side and the river flows to the sea.

It was pathetic to see the doctor leaning over the rails, his sightless eyes fixed on the quaint old town that memory alone could picture for him.

"Tell me, old boy," he said, as he pointed ashore, "tell me if an old man's memory keeps faith with him. Is that the palace over there, are there patches of salmon pink among the white masonry? A clump of coco-nuts in the garden in front?"

He was pointing away to the south to the old naval hospital, but I humoured him.

"By Jove, sir, how wonderful! you're right on it, and your description is perfect."

He chuckled.

"Ah yes, and there will be an acacia reaching half-way up to the palms. Red blooms, the flowers will look fine at this time of day. Very fine they'll look. A lovely place is Zanzibar, a lovely place. It's thirty years since I saw it first, and it stirred my blood then as it does now. Makes an old man feel very happy it does. An old blind man! but not so old and not so blind, my dear Cleveland, as some damned fools would think. It's a lovely smell, the smell of cloves." He paused. "Do you know,

old boy, I was once dining with a friend at my club, and we had a pie, an apple pie. I'm very fond of apple pie—you'll hardly believe it, old fellow, but I am, very fond of it, indeed I am. Well, in the pie there were some cloves, real Zanzibar cloves, and what do you think I did? Refused an appointment at the Middlesex Hospital and took the next boat for Zanzibar. They thought I was mad, a raving lunatic, and so I was, so I was. But it was at Zanzibar that I met Barton. He had just come down from the Congo, and he took me back with him. He died, poor fellow, blackwater—we didn't know so much about tropical diseases as we do now. You'll see the gear on shore, won't you, Cleveland? Is the captain—er—well?"

"Oh, I think so, sir, quiet at any rate—I'll manage him."

As a matter of fact Timms was so drunk that he was beginning to be sober again, not an unusual phenomenon among really earnest drinkers. His kit was packed, and I found him sitting on the edge of his bunk studying a copy of the *Nautical Almanac*, unsuccessfully, I think, for it was upside down.

"Come on, captain," I said, "the old man's waiting for us. How are you feeling?"

He got up unsteadily.

"What?" he cried huskily. "What? you ask the cap'n 'ow 'e's feelin'? 'Ow should a cap'n be feelin' after a very—hic—preposterous voyage, a very, very preposterous voy'ge—hic. Are we goin' ashore? Oh, this is Zanzibar, is it? Blarst it! 'Old up Timms, what's up wiv you, ole fellow? What, are you still frettin' about yer little Flossie?"

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Never mind, never mind, there's more—hic—Flossies. All right," as I offered him an arm, "the cap'n'll sail under 'is own steam—thank ye kindly."

He did, straight into a fat Zanzibari running along the deck with a portmanteau. The collision was terrific, sending the native headlong into the scuppers. The captain roared at him in a fury.

"Where the 'ell's yer blarsted 'ead lights, you blank blank blank coal 'ulk? Lummie, ain't you got more sea sense than to come across a feller's bows like that? Slow down, slow down."

"Come on, captain," I interrupted, "he's slowed."

He took my arm this time and I got him as far as the head of the companion ladder, and made a sign to the bo'sun who was standing by, to keep an eye on him in case of further casualties.

The Zanzibar passengers were already crowding up, waiting for the port doctor's fiat that the ship was clear of anything infectious, and by the time I got back to the promenade deck, they had begun to disembark. Dusi Khan was one of the first to go down the ladder. I watched him get into one of the waiting Swahili boats, where he was greeted by a fat Goanese. Evidently his arrival had been expected. The boat pushed off and was soon lost in the crowd. I'd have given a mighty lot to know what those two men were talking about.

By six o'clock the doctor and I were starting dinner at the Hotel Sultani, all our kit and the valuable diving gear safe in the Custom House, and Captain Timms comparatively safe in bed. The cheerful little French manager said he welcomed a

man like Captain Timms because, "ze mosquitoes when zey drink of hees blood zey die very queek of ze alcohol." I was certain that Timms would enjoy that little joke next morning.

At breakfast, the doctor calmly announced that he intended calling on the Resident, Sir Henry Smallwood. I had met this gentlemen during the war in a professional capacity (he was then a Provost Marshal) and I was glad that my services were not required.

Apparently, however, the doctor had a plan. I called a rickshaw and saw him off, then I went upstairs to Captain Timms, who said that he had a fever or a slight touch of the sun. Certainly his brow was very hot, and he had no appetite. I had a heart to heart talk with him, and he promised faithfully that from now onwards he would take more water with his whisky—anyway, that he wouldn't get drunk again while his services were required. The captain's little failing in the matter of liquor might put us in a very awkward quandary during the next day or so.

The doctor did not return until nearly three o'clock. He ordered tea in his rooms and, after he had made sure there was no chance of our being overheard, he explained what had happened. The Resident had received him very kindly and, being an old friend of a few old friends of his, had given him lunch.

"An excellent meal," he said, "old fellow, excellent it was after the awful stuff they gave us on that ship. I enjoyed myself immensely. I told him the object of our expedition, told him we were

collecting nudibranchs. Very interested he was, deeply interested, promised to give us every assistance. He'd like to see our collection on the way back. You'd better buy some jars at the chemist's, old man, and a little formalin. I wouldn't like to disappoint him in that respect."

"But what are nudibranchs?" I asked.

"Sea slugs, old fellow, sea slugs. A most interesting and absorbing group of the mollusca. Most fascinating beasts they are. I'd like to show you some, you'd be interested, I'm sure. I asked him about Thunder Island. I wanted to know what had happened with the coast islands since the war. He told me that a survey party had been there for a week last year, but that the natives still refused to live there because of their superstition. He promised to get me the chart. It will be invaluable, and help us greatly, it will."

"And how are we going to get to Thunder Island?" I asked, for that surely was the most important problem of the present moment.

"A dhow," he replied, "a dhow. There's nothing else, I fear. I called at Thompson and Thompson on my way back. I thought we might get a launch or a motor boat. There is nothing. But a big dhow will suit us admirably, and be far less trouble. The Wa-Swahili are excellent sailors."

"But what about the superstition, sir? Won't the natives refuse to land?"

"There will be no need for them to land," he answered. "They will not hesitate to take us into the lagoon. We can live on shore. Good wages and plenty of food will compensate for the evil

spirits. Thompson's have promised to get me a good dhow at once. My hopes run high. I am very optimistic. Perhaps within a fortnight the skulls—but there, old boy, I must stop dreaming, you will forgive me. It means so much to an old man, so much to feel that the greatest ambition of his life is so near to realisation. Forgive me, Cleveland, forgive me.” He had worked himself up into one of his nervous fits, so I read to him for a while until he was soothed.

Shortly after five, a native came to the hotel with a message from Thompson to say that he had secured a dhow, and that it was on the beach awaiting our inspection. The doctor asked me to go down and report, and as Captain Timms was so far recovered from his attack of fever as to be asking for more whisky, I got him to go down with me.

We found the dhow at low water, and the captain with a critical eye, that years of hard drinking had not dulled, examined her from stem to stern, from keel to gunwale. Her name scratched in Arabic on the stern was the *Sultan Selim*, and she measured roughly forty feet, with a beam of twelve. There was, of course, no sleeping accommodation, but a breadth of bare deck astern that would easily take the doctor's camp bed with room for Captain Timms and me to lie on the boards. The skipper, a villainous-looking Arab, said that she was the fastest and most comfortable boat in Zanzibar. He had sailed her as far south as Mozambique, as far north as Lamu, and in the worst gale she had never wanted bailing.

The verdict of Timms was short, but hardly sweet.

"She's a ruddy verminous muck-barrel, sir."

"Do you think she's safe for a two hundred mile voyage?" I asked.

"Gawd!" he replied hopefully. "It ain't for me to say. When I gets my orders—enough. I axes no questions. My profession is the noble one o' divin', sir."

I gathered, however, that in his opinion she was seaworthy, and that a few sulphur candles and a sack or two of Keatings' might reduce the stowaways to reasonable limits. On our return, the doctor promptly went down to Thompson and Thompson and asked them to charter the *Sultan Selim* and her crew, and victual her for a month.

The evening before we had planned to sail, a Government messenger brought to the doctor a note from the Resident and a long japanned chart case.

It appeared that the chart of Thunder Island was loaned to us by the Naval Survey Department for twenty-four hours, and that we were graciously permitted to make a tracing, and to copy such information with regard to soundings, etc., as might be useful to us in our scientific work. The doctor, with my assistance, signed the receipt, and a minute later we were up in his room, the door locked, and the map spread out on the table.

I had never known the old man bemoan the fact of his blindness as he did then. He swore most terribly, going through a whole list of his enemies from Dusi Khan, Sladen, Miss Howard and the Germans who had held him prisoner, and so shame-

fully neglected him in his illness. He calmed down, however, when I started to read out the various legends and describe the run of the coast and the various reefs and lagoons.

It was on a very large scale, and drawn with a remarkable thoroughness and attention to all detail that might possibly be of use to the mariner. Roughly speaking the island was shaped like a huge thigh bone, with a hill at each knuckle. It was entirely surrounded by a coral reef—which formed in the western coast a big lagoon to which through the reef there was a difficult but navigable channel. It was near this channel on Long Reef that the dhow had evidently been sunk. The main outline of the island and those details which are necessary for the understanding of my narrative are reproduced herewith, but I would have you know that the outline of the original was strongly marked by a thick black line and that the legend "Thunder Island" was printed in bold Latin capitals. In view of what happened that very night, this is important.

We discussed the map for an hour or more, and then, as the dinner gong had sounded, the doctor carefully rolled it up and put it inside his steel uniform case, which was fitted with a double Yale lock. The japanned case was left empty but locked. Before dining, I ran down to the Zanzibar Stores, purchased a few drawing instruments, pins, and a packet of tracing paper, and took them upstairs ready for use. We did not waste much time over our dinner, and had our coffee in the doctor's bedroom. The old man was tired, and said that he would turn in.

The *Sultan Selim* was to sail at seven, so that we should have to be down on the beach by six. All the stores were aboard, and Captain Timms, true to his promise, was still fairly sober. As the doctor said, everything was going splendidly.

Like all Arab houses, the Hotel Sultani is built round a central courtyard. There are two stories of bedrooms, the doors of which open on to wooden verandahs, connected with the basement and with each other by means of a staircase. This staircase is the only means of access. There were six bedrooms on the lower story; the doctor had No. 2 and I had No. 4. Captain Timms was sleeping in the annexe outside the courtyard. The table in No. 4 was large and smooth topped, and I decided that I should do the tracing there. The doctor agreed; and after I had promised to return the map to his trunk on the completion of my task, I took it to my room, locked the door, and pinned it out flat on the table.

It was nearly ten o'clock before I had made a fair tracing of the coast and the sounding lines, but I was working then with more confidence and speed, for in my school-days I had been considered a very fair hand at map-making. It was strange how the old labour-saving dodges came back. I found myself in quite a reminiscent mood, thinking of the old school-days, and my old school pals, the masters I had hated and loved, and all the hundred and one things that a man carries in his memory.

It was somewhere about eleven o'clock when, with a sigh of relief, I pronounced the tracing done, and unpinned it from the chart. I got up from my

chair and, for want of a better place, spread the thin sheet of paper out on the bed. The original map was left pinned out on the table. I started to fill my pipe, regarding my handiwork as I did so with satisfaction. It was a perfect copy, complete in the minutest detail.

My pipe filled and lit, I turned round to make a last careful comparison—and then from above my head came a sharp metallic click, and a blinding flash of light that burst from the ceiling, and filled the room with the dazzling glare as of a searchlight. In a fraction of a second it was out, and I heard the pad-pad of footsteps moving quickly overhead.

I rushed to the door, unlocked it and pulled—*it was wedged*. I could not stir it an inch. The chair-back came ready to my grasp. I swung it with all my might against the woodwork. The door was flimsy, the panelling quickly gave way, and I was through and out—too late, however, for I was just in time to see a man pull himself over the parapet of the flat hotel roof, jerk a rope up behind him, and disappear from sight.

Fool I may be, but I was back to my charts, and had them under lock and key before leaping down the stairs and rushing into the street. But a second's thought showed me that pursuit was useless, that to make a fuss would be merely to attract a fatal publicity to our expedition. I went back, therefore, and interviewed the very excited manager. At my suggestion, he explained to the guests that a native had tried to steal some clothing from my room, and had made good his escape. They went back to

their beds, and later the manager took me up to the second story. Immediately above my own room, No. 4, was No. 18, a small badly ventilated chamber, which the manager explained was reserved for coloured gentlemen. It had been engaged by a Goanese at six o'clock that evening.

"Was he stout?" I asked.

"But no," the manager replied, "he was tall and slender, and he wore blue spectacles. He had little luggage, a suit case only."

The door of No. 18 was wide open. The manager went in first and switched on the light. The floor was bare of carpet, and a quick examination showed that one of the planks had been levered up from the joists, and worked loose, so that, by sliding it along, a wide gap was revealed. I looked through into my own room, and there, immediately below, was the table on which the chart had been pinned. Very carefully I examined the floor adjacent to the loose plank, and found what I had already expected to find, a small heap of white powder.

"You are certain the man had no luggage?" I asked the manager again.

"*Oui, oui*, but no, none whatever."

"Nothing on his back, eh—a leather case?"

The little Frenchman puckered up his brow.

"Ah, but *M'sieu*, perhaps. *Oui*, I remember now, a small black case, a camera would it be, but small, very small, certainly not luggage."

A camera was all the luggage the man would want, a camera with a slightly telescopic lens, a few tools, and a magnesium flash pistol. I would have wagered a ten-pound note that somewhere in

that peaceful sleeping town of Zanzibar our friend Dusi Khan was at that moment engaged in developing a photographic plate of the map of Thunder Island.

CHAPTER V

THUNDER ISLAND

THE doctor had slept soundly throughout the turmoil, and I did not acquaint him with the disastrous news until morning. He took it with his usual philosophy, nor did he try in any way to blame me for being such a fool as to spread the chart out without first making sure of the ceiling above. Of course it was all very unfortunate, but the most that Dusi Khan could gather from the map was the certain evidence that Thunder Island was our destination. Possibly he had hoped that the position of the dhow was marked, but even the doctor could not say within a quarter of a mile where the boat had foundered.

What were the Egyptian's present plans, we wondered? Would he try now to fit up an expedition himself, or would he still adhere to his policy of standing by and allowing us to do the difficult work? Then what would he do? Try to rob us of the skulls? It would be a severe blow for him when the nature of the supposed treasure trove came to light—a collection of ancient and time-stained relics, perhaps already decayed into dust or sea mud.

And what was happening to the other claimant for the forty skulls? had Miss Howard's talk of

an expedition been merely bluff? The Suez mail steamer had called the previous day *en route* from Mombasa, and no European lady had disembarked. Of course she had tried to bluff us both; I thought the idea of her coming out on such a rough adventurous enterprise was absurd, unthinkable.

The doctor and I were safe on board the dhow by half-past seven, Captain Timms having already gone down. Thanks to the magic wand of the Resident, clearance papers sufficient to cover any part of the East African littoral that we liked to touch at, were in the doctor's possession. There now remained nothing but the turn of the tide to keep us from our high adventure.

And what a strange company was gathered there beneath the canvas awnings. The doctor in his Beira chair, his face now changed to animate mahogany by the sun, big blue glasses over his functionless eyes, limbs trembling with excitement. Captain Timms, perched on top of the case containing the diving gear, hairy chest and legs all bare, and brown eyes dissipated, but still twinkling, dirty Terai hat on head, and fingers filling that abominable pipe of his. Behind him, Hamzar, the Arab skipper, giving his mark to an official paper the Port Officer had brought alongside, head swathed in a bright red turban, eyes, nose, mouth, every feature speaking with eloquence of that dastardly race of slave traders, who in past centuries had wreaked their vile passions on Africa, blazed their trails of blood and disease from the coast to the Congo forest. A company indeed that might have graced the stage of a Gilbert

and Sullivan opera, and inspired in the breast of a man athirst for adventure the wildest dreams.

We got away shortly after eight, and with a strong north-easterly breeze in our favour, were soon standing well out from the land. Old Hamzar, at any rate, had not lied in regard to the *Sultan's* sailing capacities, as Timms himself admitted.

"But she'll be a ruddy rough house in bad weather," he maintained in qualification, "an' 'ow the 'ell this bloke at the tiller's a-going to keep a course without a compass beats me stiff. It ain't nat'rul, it ain't. Give me a plank and a Kelvin compass, and you can drop me in mid-Atlantic, and I'll fetch Land's End, but wivout you might as well stitch me up in me 'ammock."

It was clear, however, that the skipper called no metaphysical power to his aid in the matter of navigation. Hardly had the last leafy coco-nut of Zanzibar Island slipped down into the eastern horizon, than we sighted the mainland. We then shaped a course direct for the blur of smoke that betokened the town and harbour of Dar-es-Salam. There, towards the end of the day, we arrived and dropped anchor for the night, within a rifle shot of our old British aerodome.

What memories it awakened! Of climbing into aeroplanes in the early morning, the music of starting engines, of joyous zooms into the keen dewy air, of wide, height-getting circuits over the harbour and the bluer sea beyond, of starting off on long hopeless reconnaissances over the unmapped veldt, of German camps and bombing raids, of flying through thunderstorms and colossal

pockets and bumps, of safe returns and the writing out of reports.

I went ashore and visited the German bungalow that was once our mess, and saw the pin holes in the plaster where our Bairnsfathers and Kirchners had hung; walked over to the aerodrome and to our camping ground and stood in the place where my tent had been pitched, where many a hundred times I had lain on my bed and cursed the war, and longed and longed for peace and a sheltered prosperous remainder of life in my father's office at home.

Such is Romance. I would have bartered my soul on the spot for the feel of the joy-stick of an old two-seater, and the splutter of a starting engine, the pulling away of chocks, the opening out and the rush forward, and then, that rapturous ecstatic leap into the freest element, that taste of the tropic upper air, that sensation of absolute kingship which comes to a man who looks down on this earth from the clouds.

We stayed that night at the Kaiserhof Hotel, and sailed at daybreak with the ebb tide. The evening of the third day of our voyage found us in the lee of Mafia Island, thirty-five miles northwest of our destination. If the wind held, we should make our last landfall about midday on the morrow. The thought of it put us all in high spirits, for we were heartily sick of the accommodation of the *Sultan Selim*. Even old Timms admitted that he had never seen such cockroaches as those that sallied forth from the timbers at nightfall, and tried to share our food, and avenged their

swatted and Keatinged brethren by running over our bodies. There is something particularly objectionable about the *tickle tickle* of a cockroach's feet oozing down your spine or tripping it lightly over your lips. Timms swore they were trying to build their nests in his beard, for one night he extracted a pair of beauties that had been resting there very quietly. My own theory was that they had been gassed with whisky fumes.

We had just finished our evening meal, cooked on a Primus stove, and the skipper being forrard with his crew and out of hearing, the doctor thought it a good opportunity for discussing our plans. He began by informing Captain Timms of the exact nature of the biological specimens we were seeking.

"You will see, my dear captain," he said, passing him the whisky, "you will see, I am sure, from what I am going to relate to you, that it was necessary for us to exercise a certain amount of discretion in preparing for this expedition. Just before the outbreak of war, I was wrecked from a dhow on the reefs of Thunder Island. I had with me a collection of skulls that had been removed without sanction of the authorities from a catacomb in Central Africa. Those skulls are of tremendous scientific interest, of tremendous value to me. You see me now an old, sick man, better fitted, according to my friends, for a bath-chair than for a voyage to tropical Africa, yet I would die before I would leave those skulls to rot at the bottom of the sea, when I have friends like you and my dear Cleveland to help me rescue them."

The captain had removed the pipe from his mouth and was gazing at the doctor in alarm.

"What," he cried, aghast, "you wants me to go fishin' for dead men's 'eads?"

"Dead men," the doctor laughed, "but those are the skulls of men who lived and died ten thousand years ago. Dead men!"

"A good joke, what?" said the captain without enthusiasm. "Body snatchin' I calls it, body snatchin' it is. I don't like it, I don't I signed on to dive for sea slugs I did, an' for animals, not for fellers' 'eads. A man meets queer enough things below water as it is wivout asking for it."

"But, dash it all," I put in, "you're not going to tell us, Captain Timms, that you're afraid of a lot of fossilised bones?"

"Afraid," and he spat contemptuously over the side, "Captain Timms afraid? Blarst it, *no*, but I 'ands in my papers, I tells you straight, when it comes to body snatchin'. Might I be askin', sir, 'ow you came by those there 'eads?"

The doctor explained, but Timms was far from being mollified.

"It ain't right, it ain't right. Gawd knows I ain't what you might call a religious man. I done most of the wicked things that sailor folk, by secon' natur', do—but I ain't robbed a graveyard yet, and be damned if I do if you gave me a thousand blinkin' quid a day."

"Come on, captain," I said, "nobody's asking you to. I wouldn't myself, and I've been in the R.F.C. The truth of the matter is, those skulls never were buried, at least not as you and I hope

to be buried, in a nice little cemetery with flowers all round. They were war trophies and an ancient king put them in his museum just to show his friends what a kind-hearted old fellow he was. That happened, as the doctor says, ten thousand years ago, and what the doctor wants to do is to get those skulls again and put them in the British Museum—there's surely nothing wrong with that ? ”

Timms looked bewildered, and the doctor passed him the bottle again. Perhaps the spirit gave him heart, for he seemed considerably more at ease when he spoke again.

“ Well, doctor, I reckon as you're a clever sort o' gentleman, and bein' a doctor by perfession you ought to know a deal more about such matters 'n a chap like me. But I often lies awake o' nights thinkin' about life 'n death an' such like things, 'n I've seen plenty o' both in me time. Ay ! I've seen some queer sights, I 'ave, some damned queer sights, as would make many a sober man think 'e was drunk. I call to mind the time as I was on a Admiralty job, off Milford Haven, one o' them submarines was foundered in six fathom of Irish Sea. I was down there workin' all alone a-lookin' for a good place to get an 'awser round, for they was wantin' to lift 'er, when suddenly I sees somefing all white an' doddery like, glowerin' at me from behind a big rock. I could see 'is face as plain as I can see yer ow'n, ony it was dead an' all covered over wiv weed an' barnycles, an' Gawd, if it wasn't me ole pal Jim Saunders what went down wiv th' *Mornin' Star* when she foundered off 'Artland Point. He came creepin' towards me, an' suddenly

'e shoots out 'is 'and, stiff and blue like a bit o' marble, an' opens 'is mouf.

" 'Go back, Jake, for Gawd's sake go back,' I *felt* him sayin'. Then 'is jaw seemed to drop right off 'is face an' 'e washed backards be'ind the rock, and disappeared. They all thought I was mad, an' when I came up and told 'em what I saw and I got the sack for himperence to the Naval Capting, but the next mah as went down come up dead, an' a week later the 'ole boats-crew, was drowned in a squall as sprung up as soon as they got anchored over the wreck."

He paused to wipe his sweating brow with the back of his hand.

" Now what I'd like for to know, sir, an' you bein' eddicated ought to be able to tell me, is 'ow long a drowned man's spirit knocks about below after 'e's dead ? "

" A very interesting problem, Captain Timms, most interesting it is," the Doctor answered readily. " If you were to ask me for an explanation of your very unusual experience, I should say that the spirit of your friend had stood by you since the moment of his death. Until the time of danger arose, he did not seek to make his existence manifest, doubtless out of consideration for your feelings, but when that danger did arise, he appeared dramatically, realising that to be the only way of drawing your immediate attention. I take it that he never appeared again ? "

The captain shook his head.

" Yes, yes," the doctor continued, skilfully, " that is quite in keeping with the phenomena

usually recorded in occult manifestations. Quite normal it is. Having accomplished his duty, the spirit of your friend was free to move to the higher degree." I'll swear the doctor was quoting from Annie Besant. "A most interesting experience, profoundly interesting. Don't you agree with me, Cleveland?"

"Quite, sir, quite," I replied, striving hard to keep back a grin. "Also I can well understand Captain Timms's previous hesitation about the skulls. I don't think I'd like to dive for *fresh* skulls myself. Of course I'm not superstitious, any more than the captain is, but there are limits."

I think the Captain eyed me somewhat dubiously, but the doctor's explanation, or his whisky, had certainly brought him round to a more reasonable state of mind.

"Well, sir, I don't 'old wiv them there ghost stories as a rule, but I've seen what I've seen. If you says these 'eads don't come from an ornery consecrated graveyard, I don't see what odds it can make as far's the law's concerned, an' if they've bin dead ten thousand years, their spirits ought ter be gettin' tired like. What I don't see yet is why you couldn't 'ave told a man afore."

The doctor explained about Dusi Khan.

"Lummie," cried the captain, "an' to think I was talkin' an' drinkin' wiv the feller all day aboard that ship. Ar'st me any questions? Did 'e ar'st me anyfing else. Never left me alone. Gawd, I'd a' wrung the dirty nigger's neck if you'd only 'ave told a man afore."

Thus did we settle with Captain Timms's scruples.

It was a great relief to me, for, since seeing him and Dusi Khan together, I had felt considerable doubt as to Timms's honesty. Now, with ordinary luck, we might have the skulls lifted and be away within a week. The weather was keeping wonderfully fine for the time of year, and even if the rains did break, they could not interfere with our operations to any great extent; on the contrary, for then we should not have the problem of fresh water to consider.

True to the skipper's prophecy, we made our landfall about midday, and saw, floating by mirage in the air, the bush-clad brow of Lighthouse Hill, which, as can be seen from the map, swells up from the southern knuckle of the bone-shaped island. It was a moment of tremendous excitement. The doctor could hardly contain himself for joy.

"Ah, my dear Cleveland," he cried as I described to him the look of the hill. "I can see it, I can see it. Remember it well, I do. The old fort, have you got that yet? It's just behind the crest, half hidden by the thorn."

I could just make out an indefinite whitish gleam that might have been rock or sand or broken masonry.

"That's where I made my camp, old boy, as best I could, for I had nothing but the clothes on my back. No water for three days, no food and a thirst, my word, what a thirst I had."

He licked his lips as he thought of it, and I helped him to a Schweppes.

We were beating up to the island against a stiffish tide, and our progress was agonisingly slow. An hour passed before the top of Sudi

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Hill appeared. The sun was low before we could distinguish the bushy strip of low-lying land that connected the two knuckles together, and see the surf breaking in long wind-whipped lines on Fish Island, and hear the dull thunder of the great ocean combers pounding on the eastern coast.

Captain Timms and I had the chart out and, after a consultation with Hamzar and one of the Swahili crew, who said he had once sailed into the lagoon to take shelter from a gale, we decided to make for the haven inside Long Reef, and immediately north of Lighthouse Hill. A glance at the chart will show far better than I can describe what a tricky business this promised to be, particularly with a sailing-boat.

Even if the opening had been buoyed, it would have required a show of mighty fine seamanship to have slipped in through that bewildering maze of sunken reefs, without touching bottom. Certain navigation marks, however, were charted, and as Hamzar did not understand them, he handed the tiller over to Captain Timms, whose orders I translated into Ki-Swahili for the crew.

We were then a quarter of a mile north-west of the channel, and the captain bore in towards Long Reef, went about within a cable length of the rock, and then, according to instructions, took a line from a solitary palm on the beach to a corner of the old broken-down fort. That brought us almost on to the treacherous mass of coral that occupied the middle of the channel and divided it into two.

With the wind in the north-east the east channel was naturally barred, so the Captain went straight

for the southerly one and downed sail as soon as we cleared.

Out went the sweeps at once and with the little boat overboard manned by two of the Swahili and made fast with a cable to our bows, we were able very slowly to creep up the short stretch of coast to the anchorage, where we came to rest at exactly half-past five.

Thunder Island at last, and hardly a hitch in the plans that the doctor and I had made in Cavendish Square six weeks ago. If any occasion were worthy of a toast in the doctor's magnificent whisky, this one was, and right merrily did we give it.

"My dear friends," said the doctor, "to the success of our expedition and a quick return to England."

"And a quick return to England," I echoed.

"And lashuns of stuff like this," cried Captain Timms.

There was no time to waste, however, if we were to sleep that night out of range of the cockroaches. Our tent, camping outfit and a supply of provisions were already on the deck, and we soon loaded them into the little boat, and were away to the shore, grounding on the sandy beach that fringes the steep northern cliff of Lighthouse Hill.

The Swahili now showed great fear, and would not even step overboard. Evidently the spooks started business about sundown, which was slightly awkward, seeing how short-handed we were, and that everything must be man-handled up the side of the hill, to a decent camping ground. Lighthouse Hill is composed, not of coral rock, but of lava, and it rises in a series of broad bush-clad

ledges to its summit, fifty feet below which is the old Portuguese fort. The path, if you could call it such, followed a tremendous diagonal crack in the hillside, and led from ledge to ledge like the staircase of a huge tenement building. Leaving the captain and the doctor on the beach, I climbed the path, and found the first ledge to be wide enough and sufficiently clear of bush to serve at any rate for a temporary camping ground. It was open to the cool sea breezes and, moreover, commanded a broad sweep of the whole island and lagoon,

To give a clearer idea of the geography of the place it should be explained that the view to the north took in the whole of Long Reef and the placid lagoon inside, the swamp, and the long strip of bush that runs from the eastern slopes of Lighthouse Hill to the foot of Sudi Hill, and away to Ras Ngombe, Curlew Island and Fish Island. But for the swamp and a few patches of bare rock on Lighthouse Hill, the whole of the island was clad in terrible wait-a-bit thorn, relieved in places with baobab trees and very occasional derelict palms. To my mind it made a very beautiful picture with the sun setting in a great bed of tinted storm-cloud, the western sea, and the polished surface of the lagoon ablaze with golden light. There was music, too, in the thundering of the surf on the eastern coast that thrilled me; it never ceased for a second, nor changed its tone. A good name, Thunder Island, I thought, as I went back to the beach.

I found the doctor sitting on the one treasured

case of whisky that we'd brought ashore. I reported to him the finding of a camping ground.

"Yes, yes, old fellow," he said; "I'm sure we shall be comfortable there. The captain has gone back to the dhow. One must take precautions. One can never trust an African where his superstitions are concerned. I asked Timms to remove the dhow's rudder. She'll be helpless then, helpless as a bird with a broken wing she'll be. To-morrow we'll have her sail on shore."

Sure enough here was Timms coming back again in the little boat alone, the dhow's rudder across the after gunwale. I ran out to meet him, and we quickly had it on shore and carried to the cliff foot.

"Don't know what's the matter wiv them niggers," said the captain, "but they're all clean balmy. The skipper an' I 'ave 'ad what you might call an argyment over this 'ere rudder. Don't know what 'e said, mind you, but it sounded wicked, real wicked. 'Ad an 'ell of a job to cut its lashin's. Give me a real ole thirst it 'as. What's the old man sittin' on top of the whisky for," he said, with a sudden longing look, "not likely to blow away, is it?"

I replied that queerer things than that had been known to happen to whisky, and that there was every prospect of a drink when we got our camp fixed. First of all we had to pull the little boat up high and dry, remove the oars, and bury them in the sand. Then we carefully helped the doctor up the ledge, and returned for the rest of the kit. It was hot, tiring work, exasperating too when we

thought of those confounded niggers shivering with silly fear in the dhow.

Darkness had fallen before the last essential article was transported, a space cleared, the tent pitched, and a fire going. Timms now assumed the duties of cook, and after I had arranged the doctor's bed, and got him comfortably seated upon it, I set out my own as a table for our meal.

It was a cheery little dinner, for the doctor had seen that our commissariat was of the best. We even had a bottle of champagne (how the captain had sworn when we carried it up, the case being camouflaged "Photographic Apparatus"), and finished up with some remarkably fine port. That put everyone in a good humour, and we discussed our plans for the morrow with enthusiasm.

Timms said he would rig up the pump in the little boat, which was broad and stoutly built, and that he could easily work her with a crew of two and myself to manage the pump. We argued that the sunken dhow had been making for the very channel we had come through when she foundered, and that she was now resting off Long Reef, a few yards to the south, where the chart gave a sounding of from four to five fathoms. With the wind in its present quarter the surf there was not heavy, and although rain might be expected, there was no prospect of any great change in the weather. Everything pointed to a speedy and successful conclusion to our venture, and, after a final peg, we prepared to turn in.

Timms had fixed up our beds a few yards away from the tent with the starlit sky for a canopy,

and the soft night wind to blow the mosquitoes away. On lying down he fell asleep almost at once and he was soon snoring lustily, drowning the roar of the surf. After listening to him for a quarter of an hour, I got up and moved my bed a few yards to windward, but it grew worse. It was a terrible snore. It exasperated me beyond measure, set my nerves on edge, and at last, in desperation, I got up, slipped on my boots, and hardly aware of what I was about, set off down the crazy path towards the beach.

Whether it was the wine or that I was dead tired and already half asleep, I cannot say, but before I realised it I was in the little boat, gazing aimlessly across the lagoon, to where in the dim starshine I could just discern the black hull of the anchored dhow. She was swinging to the tide, and above the booming of the surf I heard the voices of the crew singing some barbaric chant, possibly as an antidote to the evil spirits of the island. I sat down in the gunwale, and remained there, I should say, for a quarter of an hour, bemusedly arguing with myself as to whether I should lie down on the sand and go to sleep, or return to the camp and plug my ears with cotton wool.

I had begun to yield to the overbearing desire for sleep, when suddenly, with a tremendous awakening shock I became aware that someone was walking along the beach towards me. In an instant I was up on my feet, eyes staring into the darkness. Simultaneously the figure stopped, turned abruptly, and took to his heels like a startled hare.

I was after him at once, for the very fact of his

having turned tail like that showed that he was up to some mischief. For the first fifty yards or so, he kept well down to the water's edge, and then, as I gained, he turned in towards the cliff, evidently seeking for some way into the bush where escape would be easy. I think I should have caught him, but for a confounded mango root, which trapped my foot and brought me with a fearful crash to the sand.

CHAPTER VI

THE SEARCH BEGINS

WHEN I struggled to my feet the man had disappeared and, with an ankle ricked, and my head thumping like a reciprocating engine, I realised the futility of further pursuit. I had chased him as far south as the edge of the swamp, the mangroves of which stretched out into the shallow water of the lagoon, where a whole colony of men might hide for days without fear of detection. So, very painfully and slowly, I went back to the camp, thankful that now at any rate I had some excuse for waking up the snorer. I found, however, that the storm had moderated into a gentle nasal purring, and I hopefully lay down to sleep while the gods were favourable.

It was the doctor himself who awakened me at daybreak, and, as my ankle was little the worse, Timms and I went down to the beach at once. The wind had blurred the tracks near the boat, but farther on by the cliff they were clearer, and showed that the mystery man had been barefooted. The place where I had stumbled was now covered by the tide. It was quite evident that my quarry had disappeared into the mangroves, and from there possibly made his way into the bush. But the mystery of his present whereabouts was not so important, to my mind, as the mystery of his being

on the island at all. From what we knew, a native would rather face the tortures of hell than set foot on Thunder Island after nightfall. Was he some poor devil who had been cast away through the sinking of his ship, and gone mad with suffering? Possibly; yet that would hardly explain his fear of me and the stealthy manner in which he had walked along the beach. Again I had a queer feeling that the shape of him was familiar. Captain Timms nervously suggested that, after all, there might be something behind the superstitions of the natives, but his theory that I had seen a ghost was utterly confounded by the footprints on the sand, which were made by no filmy foot, but one of very solid flesh and bone.

We launched the boat, and rowed out to the dhow. I cross-examined Hamzar. No one had left the dhow since the Big Master went away last night, with the little boat and the rudder. The evil spirits had kept every one awake. They had been terrible, terrible. The lagoon had boiled with evil things. Why had we taken the rudder away? Could not the Great White Master trust his faithful Hamzar? I hastened to assure him that our trust in him was profound, and took the opportunity for mentioning the fact that it was the Great White Master's wish that the sail should be dismantled and taken on shore.

"The sun is very hot," I said, "it will serve as a tent." Hamzar shrugged his shoulders and replied with philosophic resignation:

"It is well that the Great White Masters be comfortable even though their very humble servants die."

So back we went to the doctor and to breakfast.

The old man was very anxious that we should start with our preparations for the salving of the skulls.

"Do you think you'll be ready to go down to-day, my dear captain?" he said persuasively. "I'd like you to if it were possible. You'll have no cause to regret the finding of the case; you'll find me very generous, very generous indeed, you will."

"I'll believe you," the captain answered. "I savvied that as soon as I clapped eyes on you. You'll pardon the familiarity like, I says to meself, there's the skipper for you, old sport, you what's tired o' port an' wants a bit o' excitement to stir yer blood up. Not as 'e's arskin' fer anyfing special in that line though. As for gettin' me bathin' suit on, perhaps yes, and perhaps not, with the odds on the not, as there'll be a mighty lot o' work to do first. But me allus for the 'ard work afore the sun gives me too big a thirst. Maybe the young man'll give me an 'and? "

I signified a ready assent and, as the doctor wouldn't hear of being left behind, we all went out to the dhow.

The cases containing the pump and the other diving gear had been stowed under the grass-thatched shelter amidships where the crew usually slept, and as there was no tackle for moving them, we decided to unpack them as they stood. It was not a nice job, for to the ordinary smell of a native hut was added the piquant effluvia of bilge water, and the bilge of a dhow is not the

bilge of an ordinary ship. Even the captain's pipe and a cigar I borrowed from the doctor failed to temper its pungency.

We soon had the cases prized open, however, and the apparatus up on deck, when Timms started work on the little boat, first screwing a couple of heavy stanchions on to its bottom to form a solid mounting for the pump. While we worked, the doctor never ceased to urge us on, but Timms was not too optimistic. It was midday before the bearings for the pump were fixed and the apparatus lowered and bolted down. The diving-suit was then unpacked and spread out on the deck beneath the awning, and the captain examined it carefully.

"She'll do," he said, "but it's no mortal use diving outside the reef wiv a spring-tide like this. Wait till to-morrow's slack," says Captain Timms, "an' there'll be time enough to catch the pretty sea slugs an' the dead men's bones. To-morrow and no sooner, says he."

From that exasperating decision he would not waver, so, with the sails rolled and stowed in the small boat, we went to camp.

The heat was frightful.

While Timms set about preparing lunch, I got the boys under Hamzar to cut branches and build a framework to take the sail so that we might have a cooler spot for our meals. They worked well, completing the whole job within an hour. When that was done I told them they might go back to the dhow. Hamzar was the last to leave camp. Idly I watched him descend the path to the beach, and

then, as he moved with his slouching gait towards the boat, it dawned on me why my mysterious friend of the night had seemed familiar to me. *It was no other than Hamzar himself.* I felt certain of it, and I made doubly certain by going down to the beach, and, as soon as the party had arrived at the dhow, examining Hamzar's footprints. I had made measurements of those we had found near the swamp. The two sets were identical.

What on earth had Hamzar been doing, then? How had he got there? How had he got back? Of course he could swim. . . .

It was very perplexing—and just as worrying.

I went back and told Doctor Flint.

For the first time he appeared alarmed.

"Dear me—dear me!" he said. "Most disturbing—most disturbing it is. I'd like to watch that fellow. Don't let him know we suspect him, old boy. It would be fatal to our plans."

But he quickly recovered his usual, and to me somewhat irritating, optimism.

"Ah, we mustn't worry about it. We'll have the skulls in no time. We'll be away before the end of the week. Then—my dear boy—then—ah—we can afford to laugh then."

I hoped so with all sincerity, for there was no laughter in me at the moment. I was full of premonitions.

Lunch was not a cheerful meal. The doctor seemed tired and cross; Timms was too hot to be amusing. I was glad when they both suggested lying down until the sun had lost some of its power. They depressed me. I wanted to get away from them

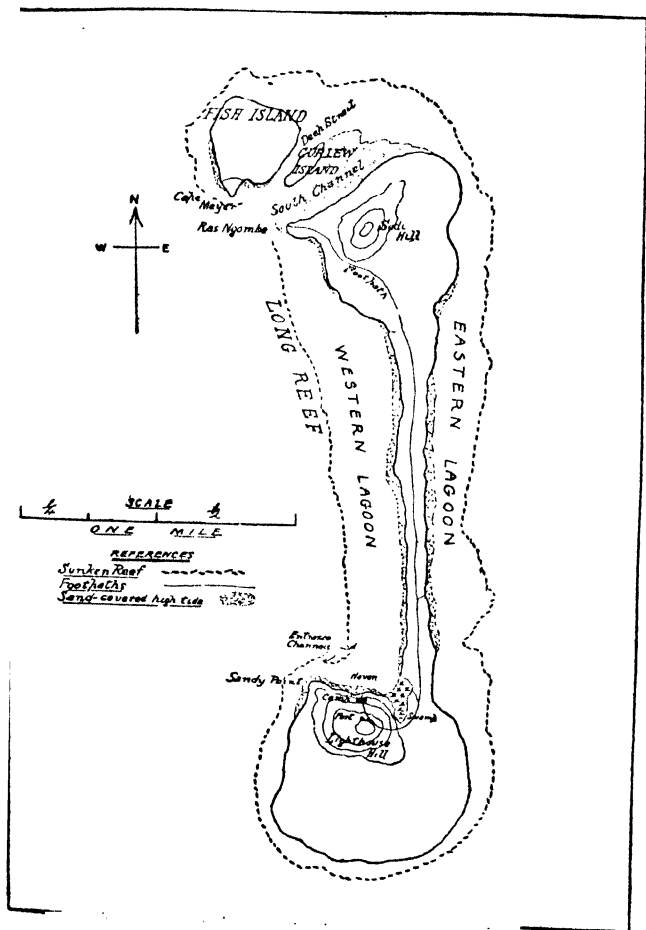
and think. Besides, I have a theory that the best way to spend the hot hours of a tropical day is to get out into the open and take exercise.

I decided to explore the island. First I climbed the stiff slope to the summit of Lighthouse Hill, and wandered round the ancient Arab fort. It was not particularly interesting, but the view was fine, and I sat down. In spite of my climb I was cooler there than I had been in camp. There was little wind. The western lagoon was a sheet of burning silver.

The scene fascinated me. For a time the island became a giant airship, flying through space, the boom of the surf the song of mighty engines.

Then, aware of a feeling of drowsiness, I got up, found the rude path that leads to the Neck, and set off for the island's northern end. I was soon on the level again. The path was very overgrown. I made my way with difficulty.

It was three o'clock when I gained the beach at Ras Ngombe, the sharp nose of land that sticks out into the South Channel immediately west of Sudi Hill. The tide was dead low. Before me was, what at high tide would be South Channel, now a wide spread of steaming sand, stretching to the north as far as Curlew Island, a small bush-clad piece of land that divided the South Channel from Deep Strait. What desire urged me to explore that island I do not quite remember, for it was a foolish thing to do. I should have known that the tide was at the turn, and that very soon the sand over which I walked would be awash with the spring-tide current.



I was thinking. My mind was far away from the realities of the moment. Since leaving Lighthouse Hill I had gone through the history of the last few weeks. My meeting with Doctor Flint and Miss Howard, my farewell to Whiteport and Margaret Stoneham, the amazing intrigues of Dusi Khan, the voyage out—Durban—Zanzibar—and now Thunder Island, and the mystery of the Arab skipper. The whole business seemed as fantastic as a dream, romantic as a novel. . . .

I reached Curlew Island, and mechanically walked on, keeping to the narrow strip of coral rock that divides its low cliff from the sand. Rounding at last its northernmost point, I had a clear view of Fish Island, and the narrow permanent Deep Strait that divides the two. There was no beach there. The coral rock on which I walked fell sheer into the water, which, being perfectly clear, revealed a gorgeous show of corals, anemones and painted weeds.

I had a mind to strip off my clothes and take a dip, but the feeling of drowsiness had returned and, finding a shadowy piece of clean sand beneath the cliff, I lay down.

Sleep comes quickly to those whose bodies have been soaked in tropical sunlight and who have breathed of the rich ozone that a hot, low-water beach exhales. In two minutes Flint, Timms, the Egyptian, and Hamzar were buccaneers, and the forty skulls were the heads of thirty-nine murdered seamen and of one beautiful girl, whose eyes were still alluring, in spite of her body having just been thrown to the sharks. But I could not

determine whether that head belonged to Margaret Stoneham or Patricia Howard. . . .

I was awakened—it must have been an hour later—by the sharp patter of rain on my cheeks. I got up quickly. The sky was overcast and leaden-hued. The echo of a thunder-clap was rumbling across the sea.

I glanced across the channel to Fish Island, and my attention for a brief while became concentrated on an object which, half consciously, I had noticed before. It looked like a tiny canoe drawn up upon the beach. It was too indistinct, however, for me to be sure and the gurgling of the tidal current quickly turned my mind to other things. The water was already lapping at my feet, and in parts there remained but a foot of dry land between it and the cliff.

Good heavens! South Channel!

I ran.

But I might have remained where I was. The broad sands over which I had walked were completely hidden by the tide bore, which was swirling in like a mill race.

The channel that now separated me from Thunder Island was a quarter of a mile across, and a moment's observation showed that the current, while racing to the south-west, had also a strong set towards me. No matter how strongly I swam, it would be impossible to reach the opposite shore. It would be madness to attempt it.

The storm, too, was breaking. Sudi Hill had disappeared in the grey curtain of rain. I thought of the canoe-like object I had seen on the beach at

Fish Island. The channel there was deep, the current doubtless stronger, yet it was so narrow that if there were the slightest set in my favour, the task of swimming it should be a comparatively easy one.

So I retraced my footsteps. I had not gone half-way, however, before the rain began to fall in earnest. It came down in blinding sheets. The lightning was appalling, the thunder ear-cracking. It was all I could do to stagger along with the low cliff as a guide, for the rain spattering up from the rock raised an almost impalpable screen of mist. In several places the sea had reached the cliff edge, and I was wading up to my knees. Round the point the going was better, but when I reached the spot where I had rested, I could not see a fifth of the way across the channel.

I climbed the cliff and waited. The rain, at any rate, was cool and refreshing.

Twenty minutes passed before a sudden yellowing of the rain mist indicated that the storm was reaching its end. The sun was out soon after, its rays arched by a glorious double rainbow. Then I had a glimpse of blue sky, and the edge of Fish Island was revealed.

I looked anxiously for the "canoe." It was still there, and I felt more certain than ever that it *was* a canoe. The channel boiled with the force of the tide, but a piece of drift wood I threw in showed me that, like the other current, it had a definite set to the west, towards Fish Island.

Long-distance swimming is the one and only sport in which I ever excelled, and I viewed the

prospect of crossing that channel without misgivings. I jammed my already sodden topee hard on to my head, tightened my belt, and walked in, then struck out with an overhand stroke for the opposite shore.

I landed a hundred yards or so west of the point opposite to which I had started, a little breathless, but otherwise none the worse. The gathering of a second storm to the south of Thunder Island warned me to lose no time. The sun, too, was lowering.

I was right in my belief that the object was a canoe. It was a small native dug-out scarcely twelve feet in length. It was lying at dead high-water mark, and there was no sign of footprints near it. Evidently it had been washed away from one of the several inhabited islands that lie off the mainland near Mafia and farther south. It had no thwarts, but I discovered to my joy a somewhat battered paddle, floating in the rainwater collected inside. I turned it over on its side, righted it again and, with little idea of the important part my action was to play in the destinies of several important people, pushed off and jumped in.

I decided, as soon as I found how well the little craft paddled, to make the whole journey in her, and in spite of the force of the current I succeeded in reaching the entrance to the big western lagoon as the sun touched the horizon. From there the going was easy. The water was smooth as an upper reach of the Thames, and a steady swift current ran in my favour.

But the second storm was breaking. Lighthouse

Hill, the camp and the dhow had been hidden for some minutes, and now came the rain, heavier than before. Furiously I paddled in towards the beach, but, what with the rain itself and the steam it lashed up from the sea, I soon lost all sense of direction. Never in all my experience of tropical Africa had I known such a downpour. I might have been standing under a waterfall. The canoe had a free board of scarcely half a dozen inches, and the sea-water was soon beating into it. I stopped paddling and started to bale with my topee, but made little headway. To add to my dilemma the storm had brought a premature end to the short twilight. In five minutes the only light I had to work by was that of the vivid lightning. . . .

It was a sudden gust of wind that proved the last straw so far as the canoe was concerned. It lifted a wave clean over her gunwales, and she sank like a stone. . . .

It was a lucky chance that the rain should cease almost at that instant, otherwise I am certain I should have drowned. I trod water for a time, reaching my head as high as I could, to catch sight of the land. It was five minutes, however, before the sky had cleared, and another ten before a light, shining pale through the low hanging mist, betokened the whereabouts of the camp. I was almost opposite to it. An easy swim of fifty yards brought the touch of rock to my feet; the rest was simple.

Timms met me at the top of the path. He looked considerably scared.

"Lumme," he cried, "what 'ave you bin

a-doing of? Where in Gawd's name 'ave you bin? "

I explained briefly my original theory of the best way of spending the hot hours of a tropical day, and that it now stood modified.

"Have you got anything to eat?" I added anxiously.

"*Hush*," he whispered. "Not so loud. The ole man's asleep. I wouldn't 'ave 'im wake up for a thousan' quid. Gawd!—'e's got a temper wuss than a she-cat wiv young—and as for swearing—oh, 'e's just awful! ' You'll get a drink when you finds the —— 'eads,' 'e says to me. I tells 'im I was feeling a bit queer in my stomach, wiv the smell of that bilge. 'Take some —— castor oil, you ——' 'e shouts.

"Now I calls that foolish. 'E don't realise what a thirst a big chap like me can work up in this 'ellish climate. It's not 'ealthy to be deprived of liquor when yer 'ole soul craves for it as a young girl craves for an 'andsome lover. All I asks for is medicine for to keep the fever away—and"—the captain spat contemptuously — "'e offers me castor oil——"

I consoled him with the promise of a quick return to the flesh-pots of Zanzibar, and a first-class passage to Australia or even to England and his lawful wife. If that did not quench his thirst, it made him thoughtful, and he hurried away to get me some food.

I crept into the doctor's tent. He was asleep, but tossing about uncomfortably. A bottle of bromide stood on the table by the bedside. Evi-

dently the excitement of the day had been too much for him, and he had taken the drug to slacken his tight-drawn nerves. There was a flush, too, on his cheeks. I smoothed his pillow, put a jug of tolerably cool water on the table and changed my clothes. Then I rejoined the captain.

He had fried some fish which the Swahilis had caught in the lagoon, and it smelled—well—more appetising than fried fish usually does.

"Puts you in mind of the Whitechapel Road, eh, captain?" I said.

"Not 'arf," he answered. "Only we ain't got no chips. Fried fish an' chips, an' a Guinness, an' a nice gel to take to the Bible class when it's finished. Gawd! but I'd sell me rights to 'Eaven for a sniff o' beer. Did the ole man say anything about 'aving a drink?"

"No," I replied, "I think he's got a touch of fever—he's sleeping, though."

"Ah, well—maybe it's all for the best. 'E'll not grudge us a taste of it though, will 'e? You'll be needing a drop o' somefing after getting yer clothes wet. It's an 'ell of a climate this—take it from me. You've got to go careful."

We went careful to the extent of two tots each.

"What's the Arab skipper been doing to-day?" I inquired, after we had finished eating.

"Oh, I've been a-watching 'im," said Captain Timms. "I've 'ad my eyes on 'im. 'E's a queer cuss, that. Came ashore just after the first rain cleared off, wiv a cask 'e wanted to fill wiv water, 'im an' another nigger. I watched 'em. First they gets the water from the pool that gathered on

the ledge of rock down yonder. Then I sees 'im sniffing about that rudder. I goes down. 'What the 'ell are you doin'?' I says. The skipper jabbers away like a monkey. 'Get to 'ell out of it,' I answers, and I packs 'em into the boat, goes out to the dhow, and brings 'er back alone. Then I brings the rudder up along here. What's the game, running about the island o' nights, when 'e says 'e's feared of spooks. I says it looks suspicious. There's more in this than meets the eye of an honest man like me."

I had a vague idea that there was, but I did not discuss the matter further. We sat and yarned for an hour or so, then we pulled our beds well into the shelter of the sail-covered hut, and after I had beseeched Timms to practise sleeping with his mouth closed, we turned in.

The doctor awakened us at daybreak. He looked considerably refreshed, and after breakfast was quite his old self again. But he implored us to lose no time in starting operations.

Timms, however, stuck to his original decision that it was no use diving until low-water, about half-past three. It was nearly three o'clock then before we got into the little boat (the doctor would not hear of staying behind) and rowed out to the dhow. We took on board two of the stoutest sailors, and proceeded to the passage that leads from the lagoon, through Long Reef, to the open sea.

Clear of the passage we hove to, and Timms made ready to "commend 'is body to the deep."

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If we were to find the wreck, however, it was essential that we should carry out the search in no haphazard way, but adopt some method whereby we should not travel over the same ground twice. According to the chart the ebb-tide usually ran with more force than the flood, and as it travelled north the chances were that if the wreck had moved at all after sinking it would be in a northerly direction. The doctor was certain that it had foundered to the north of the passage.

Our plan then, suggested by Timms, was that we should drop anchor ten yards north of the passage, and a hundred yards seaward of the reef, back in until the cable was taut, and drop another anchor. By hauling in the first, and paying out the second cable, Timms would be able to cover a fair amount of the bottom, and we should know exactly what ground we had covered by a bearing on the shore. Thus by moving the anchors from time to time, we should examine the whole of Long Reef in sections and be certain that we had not missed the object of our search.

We moored the boat, therefore, according to this plan, and then the captain got into his dress.

I bolted down the brass corslet and screwed on the helmet, and then after he had satisfied himself that I was perfectly acquainted with the working of the pumps, the pressure gauge, the air and hand lines, he allowed me to shut the little plate-glass window, and to help him over the side. The handles of the pump were manned by Juma and another stalwart member of the crew, and they started work at once ; while I very slowly paid

out the hand line, and kept an eye on the pressure gauge.

There is nothing particularly complicated about the modern diving apparatus. The pump serves the dual purpose of keeping the diver supplied with air, and of neutralising the pressure of the water, so that it does not inconvenience him. The pressure must, of course, be adjusted according to the depth, hence the utility of the gauge.

The captain struck bottom at four and a half fathoms, twenty-seven feet, and then very slowly—I could measure his progress by the lines—he started to grope his way about.

The search had begun.

Any second now might come the pre-arranged signal that he had found the wreck, that our adventure was, to all intents and purposes, over. The doctor sat perched up in the bows, all trembling and inarticulate with emotion. The hand that held the inevitable cigar to his lips shook as with palsy, and his eyes under their blue glasses roved like restless searchlights. My own nerves were keyed up to concert pitch. If someone had suddenly fired off a gun, I swear I should have leapt a yard straight into the air. That was how I felt, and went on feeling as the line slipped overboard, and the search went on.

Ten minutes passed and I got the signal to haul in the bow cable.

So far the captain had evidently drawn a blank.

Slowly, we moved out to deep water.

“No sign, old fellow?” the doctor asked tremu-

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lously at the half-hour. I was glad to hear his voice ; it broke the tension.

"Afraid not," I replied, "but we can hardly expect it, sir, can we? A huge piece of luck if we struck it right away. But he's moving. It ought to be easy to see when he does find it."

"Yes, yes, old fellow, of course, I must be patient."

At a quarter to five came the signal asking me to haul in more cable again, but we had come by then to our limit. There was no alternative than for the captain to ascend. I signalled back accordingly, and five minutes later he was climbing up the short length of ladder, bearing in his hand a piece of shell-encrusted wood. As quickly as possible I had the window open.

"Gawd!" he cried, "get me 'elmet off, for the love of Gawd. I'm boiled."

I screwed the helmet off from the corslet, and the captain's shaggy head appeared smoking with perspiration.

"Gawd! Gawd! a drink for the love—ah——" He gurgled down a pint of lukewarm rain water from my bottle.

"Not a sign of a ship there ain't, an' weed—Lord lumme, never saw such stuff. But 'ere's a bit o' treasure, what? That shows you the captain can see things even if his eyes is dim for want o' liquid nourishment."

"The dhow, the dhow," gasped the doctor. "You've found some trace of it, tell me—tell me."

"Bit of old timber, I reckon, sir; she'll not be far off, depend upon it. Captain Timms'll find her if she's wivin a 'underd miles, pervidin' 'e

gets the proper sailorman's rations—what? All right, sir. I'll take yer word for it—if you ain't shipped any. Maybe you was wise. Shall we shift 'er moorin's now? There's a good light, an' a good tide. We mustn't miss the chance o' workin' while the conditions is good."

We fell to work at once, hauled up the anchors in succession, and then shifted a hundred yards to the north and planted them again.

Once more I screwed on the helmet, and after a cheery word and an encouragement to the captain, and a whisper of Bacchanalian delights in store, I shut up the window and prepared for the second descent. It was then that one of the negroes shouted, and pointed away to the north. I stood up and saw, about a couple of miles away, a small grey motor-launch heading straight for Thunder Island.

CHAPTER VII

THE GREY LAUNCH

“**W**HAT is it, old fellow?” cried Doctor Flint.

“Don’t know, sir,” I replied. “What do you make of it, captain?” I had unfastened his window again.

“Government M.L.,” he answered without hesitation. “One of them small light craft they ’ad for ’unting submarines during the war. Used to ’ave a quick firer—an’ carry a cargo o’ depth charges. It looks mighty queer—a boat like ’er coming to a place like this. . . . Might a bloke be asking, sir, if this ’ere job of ours ain’t got what might be called a legal significance—coz if it ’as——”

“A Government boat, do you say,” the doctor interrupted. “Tell me——?”

“No, I didn’t say she was a Government boat—least not in the sense that she now belongs to the Government. I ain’t got telescopic eyes. I tells you what I can see—an’ I tells you that she’s a Government M.L. I did ’ear as ’ow a lot of ’em was sold when the war was over—for making into private yachts. But I should *like* to say that if she *does* belong to that rude class of people known as the British Navy, an’ we *are* engaged on an unlawful occasion—well—they’ve damn well got us.”

"What a hopeful sort of man you are!" I remarked.

"Maybe I am, but I knows the Navy. They've got a way on 'em, them chaps, that is anything but perlite. Stand by, say I, until we see what flag she's flying."

The boat was now about a mile away in the lane of light made by the setting sun. I wondered how the captain had distinguished her as a M.L., for there was nothing to my eye but a hull of indefinite shape, and a barber's pole of a mast.

That she was coming in our direction, however, there was no doubt, and I felt more than half-inclined to agree with Timms, and advise that we should suspend operations, at least until we had learnt who she was and the nature of her mission.

The doctor, however, would not hear of it.

"My dear captain," he implored, "please, please, lose no time. Come, Cleveland, this is of vital importance. There can be no legal complications; my papers are all in order. Will you please continue operations at once, without delay."

The captain laughed.

"Well, sir," replied he, "if them's orders, all I can say is 'Aye, aye, sir,' and Gawd 'elp us. Down we go. Come on, Mr. Cleveland, fasten up me little peep'-ole, an' say good-bye. Fifteen minutes, not a second more, wiv the darkness comin' on and the tide soon a-turnin', an' me wiv a thirst——"

I fastened the window and the captain descended. My attentions were at once directed to the pumps, so that I could do no more than take an occasional

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glance at the approaching boat. I was fully aware, however, that her course had not changed, that shortly she would be within hail, aware also of a sense of uneasiness. Yet what reason was there for alarm. Diving? Of course we were. For sea slugs and zoological specimens. There could be no harm in that. Our papers could be produced in proof.

My fear, if it could be called such, was more of a premonition; perhaps the strange conduct of Dr. Flint accounted for it. He was acting in a most perturbing manner, jumping up and down in his seat, now taking off his glasses and putting them back again, twisting and untwisting a rope end, chewing at his cold cigar, trembling and shaking like a man with D.T.'s, and moaning terribly the whole time.

I wished that he had stayed on shore. He should have been in bed with blankets round him instead of shivering out here in the open air, letting his nerves be tortured in this awful fashion. Evidently he was on fire with malaria, and when it gets a man like that, the more he fights the worse it is.

The captain moved more quickly than he had done on the first section. It might have been because the weed was clearer, or more likely because he was anxious to be up again, and quench his thirst, and satisfy his curiosity about the boat. But no signal came to give hope that he had found the dhow.

The doctor was becoming worse.

"Nothing, nothing at all?" he shouted in a sudden frenzy. "Nothing? Tell him, old boy, a

hundred pounds if he—the forty skulls—a hundred pounds, the forty skulls—ha, my friend, the forty skulls, the forty skulls——”

He got up from the thwart, came towards me, tripped, and fell heavily, striking his head with a fearful bang against a sharp corner of the pump casing.

In a second I was to him.

He had lost consciousness. I made him as comfortable as I could and gave the signal to Timms to come up.

Here was a situation to be in !

The doctor seriously ill, Timms down below, the mystery boat now riding just outside the reef, and a dinghy putting off from her, evidently coming towards us.

Aeas seemed to pass before the captain's helmet broke surface, before I had his corslet off, before he shook his legs free of the dress, before he had got a clear understanding of what had happened. And by that time I had made a hasty examination of the doctor. It looked as though he had fever, and that his fall was due to a faint. Apparently he had not hurt himself beyond a bruise on the side of his head.

“ Oh, Gawd ! ” Timms cried, “ this comes o' tryin' to disturb the dead. A judgment. I might 'a' knowed it.”

“ Oh, shut up,” I cried irritably. “ He's got fever. Let's get back to camp.”

“ Now, now,” he answered, shifting his gear out of the way of the oarsmen, “ don't be a-bitin' the captin's 'ead off. 'E's not blamin' the pore ole

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doctor. Pore ole chap! 'E'll be all right when he gets a sup o' whisky 'ot in 'im, an' the blankets to make 'im sweat. I knowed it would 'appen. Arskin' fer it, 'e was, comin' out wiv the fever on 'im. I only wish as we'd found what 'e wanted—better'n medicine that would 'ave been. Lumme, there's the dinghy a-waitin' on us. Don't look like the Navy, do it?"

The dinghy had stopped on the unbroken water of the channel, her occupants evidently nervous of risking her, weighted down to the gunwale as she was, in the moderate surf where we had been operating. She was manned by two natives, and two persons in conventional European tropical kit were seated in the stern. There was no suggestion of the Navy or anything official in their attire.

We approached quickly, and then with an awful shock, I suddenly became aware that one of the occupants was a woman, and, good heavens! none other than Miss Howard, Sladen's niece!

Before I could recover from this astounding discovery, she was speaking to me, calmly, as if we were back in Cavendish Square.

"Good evening, Captain Cleveland!"

For the life of me I could not answer. She smiled.

"You seem in a tremendous hurry. Aren't you going to stop?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Howard, we have a sick man with us. Perhaps, if you'll follow us in——"

Her tone changed completely.

"Oh," she replied, "I'm sorry. Is it Doctor Flint? Yes, we'll come in after you—this is the

channel, isn't it? Perhaps you will speak to our men, they don't understand English."

I shouted to them in Ki-Swahili, and we rowed through the channel with the dinghy in our wake, but fortunately out of speaking distance.

"Another seeker of the sunken dhow," I explained to Timms. "You'll have to watch her, I can tell you. She'd squeeze information out of a deaf blind mute," I added with bitter emphasis.

"A-ha," said he, "the plot thickens, what!"

"Considerably," I replied; "don't trust her an inch."

We reached the shore, and the dinghy grounded as we got out. I ran up to the camp for a blanket, and when I returned I found that Miss Howard had calmly taken charge of the doctor. He was and still lying as I had placed him, breathing stertorously, the fever burning red in his face.

"Really," I cried, "it's awfully kind of you, but I can't let——"

"But, Captain Cleveland," she answered with a disarming smile, "he's dreadfully ill. I'm a trained nurse; you surely don't think I would leave him. Charley,"—she turned to her companion—"please help with the stretcher, will you? Oh, Captain Cleveland, my—my brother Charles."

He was not unlike the mental picture I had already made of him from Major Darling's description. He was about my own age—short, and inclined to stoutness. His face was pale, his eyes devoid of expression, and his mouth curved like a baby's. He wore a monocle, which served to accentuate the flabbiness of the *tout ensemble*.

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He held out a beautifully manicured hand, coughed, and stammered:

"D-d-delighted to meet you. Heard of you, of course. Awful business, what! Awfully ill, I should say."

I don't remember what reply I made, for I was angry, damnably angry. It was simply preposterous, this girl coming along in such a ridiculous fashion, treating us all as if we were children. I will admit that she went about her business in a very efficient and capable manner. That she handled the poor old doctor with a gentleness that was hardly consistent with her previously expressed opinion of him—but—well—I was quite capable of doing that myself.

We fixed up the blanket stretcher with the oars, and carefully lifted our patient on to it. Then I turned once more to Miss Howard.

"It's awfully kind of you," I said. "But I think my friend and I can manage now. It will be dark in ten minutes. You will never get back to your boat in the dark. Thank you very much. You've been most kind."

"Oh, I couldn't think of leaving him now," she said seriously. "He ought to have quinine and proper treatment. You've got medicine with you? Good. Come on, then, let us carry him to your camp."

Whatever my feelings were at this outrageous interference on the part of a person confessedly opposed to my employer and his schemes, I had to admit that there was a certain advantage in it, for the path was rough and steep, and Timms and I

would have had a difficult task carrying the stretcher unassisted. As it was, we did it easily. Miss Howard on one side, her brother on the other, myself in front, the captain behind. We carried him into the tent, but as soon as he was comfortably arranged on the bed, I spoke firmly.

"Miss Howard, I am really deeply indebted to you and Mr. Howard for your kindness, but whether you think me ungrateful or not, I must ask you to return to your boat. I have not the advantage of being a trained nurse, but I think I know what is necessary with malaria. Will you kindly put that thermometer down?" She had taken the thermometer from the doctor's bedside, and was shaking it.

"Captain Cleveland," she said, "you are behaving in a silly, selfish way. The doctor is very ill. Are you going to let your prejudice, your suspicions, interfere——"

"Nothing of the sort," I interrupted, "but I am aware that you have no cause to befriend Dr. Flint. So far you have been most kind; but if you persist in this unreasonable attitude, I shall naturally conclude that you are doing it with an object. You will admit there is something you are anxious to learn from him—the doctor is delirious—he may——"

"Oh," she blazed angrily. "You suggest that I would take advantage of a sick man. Oh——"

"Look here, old man," her brother put in, "this is goin' a bit strong, isn't it? I mean to say——"

"Oh, damn it, shut up!" I cried in wrath.

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"Get out of it. I apologise to Miss Howard, but for goodness' sake go back to your boat. Please, Miss Howard, leave this camp at once."

Very coolly she replaced the thermometer on the table, then walked past me out of the tent, turning as she reached her brother's side.

"I cannot accept your apology, Captain Cleveland. You are extremely rude."

Howard said nothing, and the pair set off down the path towards the beach.

But darkness had now fallen. It was almost impossible to see across the lagoon.

"Stand by the doctor," I said to Captain Timms; "I'll have to see them off." I picked up my electric torch, overtaking them at the foot of the cliff.

"I don't think we require any assistance," the girl said frigidly as I came up. "My brother will find the boat."

"I'm afraid he won't," I said, for in our anxiety about the doctor we had forgotten about the natives and their confounded superstition. "Perhaps you are not aware that Thunder Island is haunted."

"I say, I say," Howard cried suddenly, "he's right you know, the boat's gone. What an awful thing to happen!"

"Perhaps *you* can give an explanation." Miss Howard turned on me accusingly.

"I'm trying to," I replied. "The East African natives have a superstition about this place. Nothing would induce them to set foot on it after nightfall; if your own boys didn't know about it, ours would soon inform them."

"Particularly if you instructed them to," she interrupted. "It was very clever of you. Would you kindly shout to them and ask them to return? We cannot stay here all night."

"No, certainly not," I answered with conviction. "It would be most inconvenient, but I doubt if they'll come for you."

I hailed the dhow, which was riding three hundred yards from the beach. Hamzar answered. Yes, both little boats were there. The men were afraid, they dare not put off to the beach. Could we not understand what danger lurked there? It was unfortunate that the white lady and her brother had no tent, no blankets. Would her boys row out to the big ship? No, they feared the reef, the channel could not be seen.

I translated this vexatious conversation for the benefit of the two castaways.

"It is very clever," the girl said coldly.

Personally I failed to see where the cleverness came in. There was nothing I would not have done to see them both packed up in their confounded dinghy, and away outside the reef, but the more I explained, the more unreasoning she became. She made me furious, the whole business was so utterly exasperating.

"I say, why not offer them something?" suggested Charley. "Backsheesh, don't you know, might help, what?"

"It wouldn't work with the natives where the 'unnatural' is concerned," I said. "However, if you'll kindly wait——"

Burning with rage, yet uncomfortably aware

that I had acted in a priggish way, I took out the automatic Colt from my holster, wrapped it up carefully in my oilskin tobacco pouch and put it back. Then without giving either of them an inkling of what I was about, I ran along the bare strip of coral rock, took off my boots and waded into the water. It deepened quickly, soon it was up to my waist.

"It is madness ; please, please come back," cried Miss Howard from the darkness.

"I say, I say," added her brother.

What he did say I could not tell, for the next moment I was striking out for the dhow, and the splashing of the water in my ears drowned everything, even the boom of the surf. The lagoon was smooth and the water delightfully warm, and had it not been for the thought of the doctor's illness, and the annoying interference of the girl and her ass of a brother, the feeling that I had made an utter fool of myself, and the generally unfortunate chain of events that marked our second day on Thunder Island—well, I might have enjoyed it. Actually I did not, and I was very pleased to see at last the black hull of the dhow, and the two little boats made fast to her stern.

My appearance was greeted by a terrible shriek from one of the crew who was squatting by the tiller. It was taken up in chorus by the rest as he informed them of the approach of an awful sea monster. My climbing into the dinghy did not allay their fears, perhaps because my body was all aglow with phosphorescent scum from the sea. Being out of breath, I could not speak for several

seconds. A short rest, however, and I pulled out my pistol and called for Hamzar.

Reassured by the sound of a familiar human voice, he stood up from among the rest of the cringing terror-stricken crew, who were sprawling, praying, in the dark. My orders were short and to the point.

"Man the dhow's boat with four men, including the two from the stranger's boat."

"Great Master," he whined, "they would not go to the shore, it would be death——" For answer I fired my pistol in the air.

"The next bullet will be through a man's heart." Thus stimulated, the four men jumped in and I joined them.

"To the shore," I ordered. They moved as if the devil himself were in command, and we reached the landing-place in record time. I jumped out. Miss Howard started to thank me, but I had no time for pleasantries.

"Now," I said, "if you will please get in, I'll row you out to our dhow, pick up the dinghy and see you out of the channel."

"Really it's awfully decent of you," said Howard.

"Don't mention it," I replied. "Will you get in, Miss Howard?"

She obeyed, and to the considerable relief of the negroes, we were soon under way again. No one spoke until we were under the stern of the dhow, and I had slipped the dinghy's painter and made it fast to our own.

"I owe you an apology, Captain Cleveland," said Miss Howard then, "yet I think you'll agree

with me that I had some cause to doubt your word."

"Well, yes," I replied, signalling to the oarsmen to make for the channel; "but please don't talk of apologies—really—they're unnecessary on occasions like these, don't you think?"

"I don't," she replied. "It appears that we are at war, but even war has its etiquette—the red cross, for instance."

"And white flags," I retorted, thinking of how, under pretence of friendship, she had pumped me that afternoon in Cavendish Square.

But unfortunately she mistook my meaning. "Oh, you dare to repeat your insulting accusation," she cried angrily. "Dare to insinuate that I would take advantage of a delirious invalid. Stop the men immediately. I would rather drown than go another yard with you. Charley, pull the dinghy in."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," I cut in angrily. "My remark did not in any way refer to the unfortunate incident of the camp, and I've had enough adventure to-day without having to rescue you both from drowning. At present you're in my boat, under my orders. Your dinghy would capsize instantly if it got foul of the reef. I'm going to see you through the channel; there my responsibility ceases."

"Any bally sharks about here, old fellow?" inquired Charley, relieved, I think, that he had been saved from another chance of distinguishing himself.

"Swarms," I replied, "and all man-eaters."

The girl did not speak, but I could feel her thoughts as a nervous man can feel a thunderstorm.

We found the channel by striking the lee of Long Reef well to the north, and slowly feeling our way along it until the strong current of the incoming tide betokened its whereabouts. After that there was little trouble, and a hundred yards out we stopped, pulled the dinghy alongside and put the castaways aboard.

"You'll be safe now," I said as they pushed off, "and don't worry about the sharks, Mr. Howard. It isn't often they attack a boat. Not very often that is; in any case, if you splash and shout at 'em, and you don't let 'em turn over on their backs, they haven't a chance of biting."

"Good night, old thing," he cried; "awfully sportin' of you puttin' us out like this, I must say. Jolly of you, quite."

"Don't mention it, sir," I replied; "it has been a genuine pleasure. Perhaps we shall meet in the morning. Yachting, are you?"

"No, Captain Cleveland, we are not yachting," came Miss Howard's cool voice from the darkness. "We are marine biologists, looking for sea slugs."

"I'm afraid they're very scarce round here," I shouted back, but the dinghy was now too far away for further conversation, and I ordered the boys to pull swiftly for the channel and the dhow. They did so with a will, and a few minutes later they were safe back with their companions and I was away to the shore, thinking anxiously, as I rowed, of the doctor and what a disloyal pig I had been looking

after the safety of his enemies, while he was lying sick.

Yet for the life of me I could not but admire the girl's cleverness. Even in that brief time when I had been away getting the blankets she had evidently made the captain talk and got information from him.

How much, I wondered? Certainly she was aware now of what we thought to be the approximate position of the wreck, and that up to the present we had drawn a blank. Had she brought a diver with her? I burned at the thought that, while I had been a puppet in her hands, I had not taken a single opportunity of pumping that obviously pumpable brother of hers.

Well, there was consolation that she was now safe at sea, and that I had defeated one brilliant plot of hers. Nurse to Dr. Flint! Her impudence was amazing. If I had permitted her to, I believe she would have taken charge of the whole camp, sent the captain and me away so that her patient would not be disturbed, so that he could babble away as freely and as usefully as he liked.

As the tide still flowed I ran the cable out and fixed the anchor well up on the beach. I then lost no time in getting up to the camp.

"Lumme, I thought you was shot, or somefing," said Captain Timms, "but I daren't leave the ole chap—listen to 'im—can't say nofing but 'Forty skulls, forty skulls.' I don't like it. It ain't nice for a sick man to be babblin' about skulls; you don't think 'e did 'em in, do ye?"

"Nonsense, I bet you babble about worse

things than skulls when you are delirious, captain."

I took the hurricane lamp and had a look at the doctor ; his temperature was nothing like so high as I had expected. There was no sign of anything but a bad attack of fever.

"No need to worry," I said to Timms.

"Shall we take it in shifts, two hours each?"

He assented, and took the first watch, while I changed my garments for the second time that day, and sank, utterly exhausted, on my bed. Tired? I could have fallen asleep on a cactus.

CHAPTER VIII

HENRY TROUT SEES RED

DAYBREAK found the doctor's condition easier, his temperature down—the delirium gone. Yet he was still very sick, and there seemed little possibility of his getting up for two days at least. Was it safe to leave him while Timms and I carried on with the diving?

We made tea, and I took a cup in to him, placing my arm under his shoulders while he sipped it. He was weak, but his brain, clear of the fever, was active as ever.

"Tell me what happened, old boy," he asked eagerly. "I fear I had an attack—the malaria is still in my blood. What was the boat?"

"It was Miss Howard, sir," I answered; "she and her brother. They came ashore just after us, and the girl wanted to stay and nurse you. I had an argument with her and finally saw her off to her boat again."

"Ah! That she-devil!" he cried, "that she-devil! Beware of her, Cleveland, beware. She's beautiful—have nothing to do with her. A snake—they're all snakes. Wanted to nurse me! My word! I'll shoot her if she comes near me again. . . . We'll have to be quick. They've got a boat—they'll have a diver. I had a seizure. Yes—

yes—old boy, my friends were right. I am old—too old—an old blind man—sick—tired—worn out—finished——”

He lay back on his pillow, and then rose up again in a sudden fury.

“Finished? Finished?” he shouted. “Do you think so? Do you think I am finished? Do you think I’ll give in? Do you—*do* you?”

“I don’t, sir,” I answered, “and I see no reason why you should be. But the fever’s taken it out of you. Timms and I will carry on if you wish——”

“Splendid—splendid,” he interrupted with enthusiasm; “I knew you would. I knew you were more than a match for an unscrupulous adventuress like that woman. My God! What a venomous pest she is! Beware of her, old boy. A woman’s power for evil is unlimited. She’ll try everything. . . . Ah! but we’ll beat her, as we’ll beat the rest of ’em. You’ll find the skulls for me. I’m making my plans. A year from now, my monograph will set the whole scientific world thinking. What envy there will be! What disputes and arguments—what refutations! But the skulls, they will prove everything.

“Tell me, old boy, can you start at once? The tide should be right. You must leave me, of course. It will be agony. I shall be terribly anxious. But I know you will find them. Did the captain find anything in his last descent? More wreckage?”

“Nothing whatever, sir; the tide was stirring up the weed too much.”

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"Yes, yes, I must be patient. Now please go down. Lose no time. Not a second. I shall be all right. Fire your pistol, old fellow, when you—when you find it. I shall wait for it anxiously. Beware of that woman. Have nothing to do with her."

"Right-o, sir," I said, "I'll watch her. And if you should want us, will you give us the same signal? Here's the pistol—I'll put it near to hand."

I loaded the pistol, placed it on a box by the bed, and rejoined Timms, who was busy with his breakfast.

"Sit down, young man," he cried. "The vittles is good and well cooked. And if you takes the advice of one what's seen a deal o' life, an' knows what a sound constitootion means in a 'norrible climate like this, you'll fall to 'earty. What's the old man got to say for 'imself this morning! What's 'e think about that gel an' 'er launch and that dude that's along with 'er? I'll bet he's not amiable."

"He's not exactly," I answered. "But he's still full of hope and holy zeal about those skulls. Wants us to get busy at once—what about the tide?"

"All right for a couple of hours. We shall be all the better wiv'out 'im. Shivering an' moaning and falling down in fits. But what's the other folk a-doin' of? That ruddy boat's a-comin' into the reef. Is that there gel on the same lay as us?"

The motor-launch had weighed anchor, and

very slowly she was creeping in towards Long Reef.

"Come on," I cried, "that's what she's after, and we've jolly well got to beat her. I'd rather shoot myself than allow that girl to lift the case, after all we've gone through."

"She's a rare bonny gel though, ain't she?" he grinned.

"Yes, and a respectable one too, Captain Timms."

"Aye, aye," he sighed, "an' Cap'en Timms is a respectable married man wiv a damned sight more married than respectable about it."

I had a last look at the doctor and then we went down to the beach and launched the boat. A few minutes later we were away to the channel, the diving gear taken aboard from the dhow, where I had left it the night before, and three of the Swahili as our crew.

The launch had come to anchor on the very spot where we had dived last night. Already I could distinguish the Howards on the after-deck and a tall white man getting into a diving-suit.

"There you are, captain," I cried, "there's the opposition party. Do you think you could slit his air pipe if you met him underneath?"

"It would bring us bad luck," he replied. "There's enough spirits on this damned island and hereabouts wiv'out us askin' for more, an' ain't the feller on'y doin' his dooty same as you an' me?"

"Yes," I replied, "but I'm sure it would save

us a deal of trouble if you could manage to do him in. Quietly, of course, so as not to make a fuss. Bear it in mind, won't you, when you get down? "

"Avast, young man," he rebuked me. "Don't you be jokin' about terrible things like that. Death be an awful thing, an' drownin's worse'n death. Did you bring the whisky wiv you? "

"I did," said I, "one flask, and there'll be a drink when circumstances justify. Look, he's going down just where we left off. What had we better do? "

"Go norrard—work as we did yesterday. It's all luck on a job like this. There's as much chance one way as another."

We rowed up to the launch. The captain had been right in his early diagnosis. She was an ex-M.L., a type of craft used during the war in anti-submarine operations; twin-screwed, exceedingly powerful, very nimble in manœuvres. Evidently she had been transformed into a yacht, for her bows were adorned with a carved mermaid, and her name, the *Admiral Beatty*, was lettered in gold—Mombasa, her port of registry. That explained how they had managed to get here so quickly. Evidently they had been on the Suez mail, and disembarked at Mombasa.

Miss Howard was dressed in riding breeches, and a drill shirt blouse, and wide Terai hat. She looked very beautiful.

"Ship ahoy!" I hailed. Howard waved his hand.

"Good morning," he shouted. "Topping morn-

ing, what? Awfully hot though, don't you think? "

" Yes, rather," I replied. " Fishing? "

He laughed. " Really, you know, that's splendid."

The girl did not take the slightest notice of us—her attention was concentrated on the pump. Certainly she was a very versatile young woman.

" Well," said Timms, as he watched her with evident admiration. " It's not every diver as 'ud trust 'is life to a young lady—but I'll bet she knows 'er job. Lummie, but she's a fine gel, ain't she? "

" You're too romantic, Captain Timms," said I. " That girl's an adventuress of the very worst type. She'd think nothing of poisoning your whisky, or of sticking a hatpin through your heart, or dipping a thermometer in arsenic before putting it under your tongue. Besides, as I've already told you, she's respectable. Let's get to business."

We rowed a hundred yards north of the *Admiral Beatty*, dropped anchor and started operations, without any more delay than was necessary to get the captain into his suit, and for him to consume a carefully measured whisky and water.

" It's going to be a race, captain," said I, before I fastened up his porthole, "and if you find the dhow, get the case out at once."

" Aye, aye, sir," he replied, " I'll 'ave it out all right. But keep an eye on that there gel. If she's what you say, it might be someone else as gets their air-pipe cut. She's got a telephone. We ought to 'ave 'ad one o' them.

They're useful—if—if a chap gets foul of anything."

"You get foul of that wreck," I said, "and never mind the girl. Your fortune's made if you lift the skulls—the doctor's as rich as Vanderbilt—and don't forget the sea-slugs if you see any; nothing like keeping up appearances."

And so he went down; and the race, for such it was, began.

And what a race it was, slow like the movement of a glacier, but tense, exciting, momentous as the Derby. Imagine the waiting, hand on the life-line, knowing that any second might come the magic message: watching the other boat, aware that any moment might come a signal, a signal that they had found the wreck, that Dr. Flint had toiled and planned and dreamed in vain. During that long nerve-straining vigil, while the lines and pipes slipped overboard, while we hauled on our cable and moved on to another section, I was conscious of one great burning desire: to see the case aboard, to take it ashore to the poor sick doctor, to open it in front of him, to see his fingers playing over the bones, to hear him chortle with delight, to hear him ramble about his plans, his triumphant return to England, and I would have bartered anything for the fulfilment of that desire.

Had the Howards pulled the case in then, I believe I should have held them up at pistol point and commandeered it.

For an hour the race went on, I saw the other diver come up, saw Miss Howard question him eagerly, saw by her attitude what his answers were.

They weighed anchor, and took up a new position, this time to the north of us, and down the diver went again.

Timms came up, hot, tired and thirsty. We shifted north of the launch and down he went again, swearing and complaining. He had seen nothing, nothing but weed, coral, oysters, slimy things and devil fish. One great octopus, oh, a tremendous monster it was, he had been forced to cut away from his legs. It tripped him up and had tried to twist its slimy arms around his head. . . .

Slowly, slowly we crept on. Half an hour and the launch again slipped ahead of us; twenty minutes later we anchored ahead in turn.

At half-past nine, Timms ascended for the third time. I screwed off his helmet and gave him a drink, this time of water neat.

"No good," he gasped, "no blinkin' good. Gawd! Get me out of it."

"But dash it all," I cried, "you're not going to give in while the other man's down?"

"Where is 'e then?" he demanded. "Look, the bloke's a-comin' up, like any other chap as knows 'is job. The tide's gettin' too strong. Stand by, say I, till evenin'."

True, the other man was now being assisted on to the deck of the *Beatty*.

"No mortal use," continued Timms, "on'y wastin' time, divin' wiv a flood like this. The mud's all astir. You can't see a yard ahead. Look, 'e's gettin' 'is 'at off. Gawd! I wonder if that's a teetotal ship."

There was nothing for it but to bow to the inevit-

able, and return to the shore until the slackening of the tide, which would not come until nearly five o'clock. With the sun down at six, that would mean but an hour's work at the outside—unless we worked at night. I doubted if Timms would consent to that. Should I go down myself? I was not lacking in confidence—but the chances were he would not like it.

I helped him out of his suit, and then ordered the negroes to pull the anchors up. In the grip of the current we drifted towards the launch. Howard was unscrewing the diver's helmet, and suddenly the latter's head appeared, steaming as Timms had done.

"Gawdstrewth," cried Timms in sudden amazement. "Strike me pink, if that ain't 'Enry Trout I'll eat my blinkin' boots. . . . 'Enry, 'Enry," he shouted. The other diver looked as if he'd heard a voice from the dead.

"Gawd, lumme," he cried, "Jake Timms, my ole mate Jake. 'Ere, come alongside."

Timms did not wait for orders. He grasped the oars from the Swahili and brought the boat under the launch's stern, climbed up on deck and seized the hand of Henry Trout, and shook it vigorously. A tremendous animal was this old mate of his. Six feet three if an inch. His face was clean-shaven, broad, and ox-jawed, his nose was flattened, his mouth a straight line, lips thin and colourless. The body and face of an ex-pugilist, if I knew anything, and of a man of evil disposition.

"'Enry," said Timms—and turning to me, "Ere, Captain Cleveland, my ole pal 'Enry Trout; 'im

an' me was mates together on the *Rose o' Scotland*. Didn't we dive on the same job orf Flamborough 'Ead? Didn't we raise a thousand golden quid from the *City o' York*? Didn't me an' 'Enry fall in love wiv the same gel in Cannin' Town? Didn't we once roll a barrel o' beer down the Whitechapel Road of a Sunday night? Didn't we——"

"Captain Cleveland," cut in Miss Howard angrily, "will you kindly order this man to leave our boat at once?"

"'Ave a drink, Jake; come an' 'ave a drink," cried Trout, ignoring her completely.

"Trout," she cried, "you're not to do anything of the sort. This is not a public-house. Captain Cleveland, how dare you—I suppose this is another plot; go back to your boat," she blazed at Timms.

"Now, now," he replied, beaming at her. "Don't be angry wiv a pore ole sailor man, what's just met a long lorst pal. Ain't you got no sentiment, miss? . . . Thank you, 'Enry," as Trout returned with a bottle of whisky and some glasses. He helped himself liberally—then "'Ere's to you, an' 'appiness, an' good findin's—Gawd, but it's good to strike some one real congenial-like these 'ot an' thirsty days. Now you won't be angry, will you, miss?"

Sublimely indifferent to the embarrassing nature of the situation they had produced, the pair sat down on the pump casing and began to chat familiarly. Miss Howard disappeared into the cabin.

"Come on, captain," I said. "It isn't playing the game. You can't drink whisky neat in this part of the world or you'll be dead——"

"Gawd lumme, Trout," he interrupted. "Ain't you goin' to give my friend Mr. Cleveland a drink? 'Ole pals we are. You'd never find a better chief officer than Mr. Cleveland—give 'im a drink for the love o' Gawd—give 'im a drink——" He held up the bottle and just at that moment Miss Howard came out of the cabin doorway, a pistol in her hand.

"Throw that bottle overboard at once," she said quietly, "quick."

"No, no, yer jokin'," cried Timms aghast. "It's whisky."

"I'm not joking, and if you don't throw it over at once I'll fire."

Timms swore, stood up and did what he was told. The bottle fell with a plop into the sea.

"Lady, lady," he said with a look of absolute agony, "that's the wickedest thing I've ever done in me nat'rul."

"What the blarsted 'ell did you do it for, Timms?" shouted Trout furiously. "Afraid of a blarsted gel like 'er?" He turned on her. "What d'yer mean wiv yer pistol pointin'—put it down—or by Gawd I'll——"

He advanced towards her menacingly. She gave a cry of alarm and stepped back, tripped over a rope and stumbled to the deck, the pistol cracking as she did so. Trout swore. I jumped up on deck, but Timms forestalled me. He gripped his friend by the arm.

"No, 'Enry, 't wern't the pore gel's fault—it went off by mistake. Come on, forget it."

"Forget it be damned," the other roared, "an' who the 'ell are you to give me orders? You, Jacob Timms, you white-livered pub crawler, where's yer guts, you blamed jelly fish? Who's you givin' yer orders to——?"

"Stow that, stow that," the captain cried.

"Stow what?" Trout roared, in fury. "Stow what? Tell me to stow it, tell me——" He caught the captain a heavy blow on the jaw that sent him staggering back against the rails. For a second Timms stood there dazed, then with an awful oath, he went for Trout. Miss Howard screamed, Howard rushed to her side, and I jumped up on the deck and tried to separate the two men. For my pains I got a mighty thwack on the shoulder from Trout that sent me spinning like a top and nearly knocked me overboard, and before I could recover Timms went crashing to the deck. He rose again to his knees, and Trout bent over him.

"You swine, I'll kill you, I'll kill you," he roared, his hand closing round one of the lead-soled diving boots. He raised it—and the next second I flung myself on his back and got his neck in the grip of my right hand, forced his head forward with my left until he choked.

Panting and gurgling, he sought to free himself, tearing at my hands, swaying from side to side, bending back, then jerking forward and back again like a spring board. His strength was terrible. My joints creaked with the strain, and when, with a

mighty effort he suddenly stretched up straight—I was lifted clean off my feet—but even as my grip relaxed, he doubled up and fell back unconscious. Timms had struck out and caught him hard in the solar plexus.

“Quick, ropes,” Timms panted.

Miss Howard and her brother fetched two lengths of manila, and we trussed him up. He was foaming at the mouth.

“Mad, mad, that’s what ’e is,” gasped Timms. “Allus like that was ’Enry—a good pal, but an awful temper. Mad, ’e is—ought to ’ave been in Colney ’Atch years ago. Gawd, ’Enry, you still knows ’ow to ’it.”

“I say, I say,” said Howard, “Cleveland, you’re no worse?—awfully plucky of you . . . perfectly dreadful . . . never seen such an awful affair.”

“Are you hurt, Captain Cleveland?” asked Miss Howard with concern.

“No, no, of course not,” I answered. “But, by Jove, Timms is right—he’s mad. Have you got any drug? Opium pills?”

“’E’ll be all right,” put in Timms, “’e’ll be all right if you let ’im sleep it off. I knows ’im. ’E’ll be like a pet lamb for days arter. Takes it out of ’im. Let ’im sleep. Get ’im out of the sun.”

“We might have some bromide in the medicine chest,” said Miss Howard.

“The very thing,” I replied—“a big dose, he can stand it.”

We carried him down to his bunk. Timms took

a towel, dipped it in water, and wiped his friend's face with it.

"Pore old 'Enry; takes you bad, don't it? There, there, don't be a frettin' coz you didn't do yer shipmate in—why, you ought to be a prayin' for forgiveness, you bad man. Murder' im, would you? An' what would 'appen to you then? 'Ave to go an' get yer pretty little neck put out of jint—an' all for a bottle o' whisky . . . no, no, you mustn't try to get up."

He was regaining consciousness, and beginning to struggle. "What d'you think we lashed you up for?"

"Blarst you, blarst you, I'll kill you, Timms. I'll——"

"No, you won't, just you lie there peaceful like. 'Ere's a sup o' whisky for you."

Miss Howard had come in with the bromide. I signed to her to put a drop of spirit in the glass. He took it at a gulp.

"Now, now," continued Timms soothingly, "you'll soon be all right, 'Enry. If it wasn't that me throat was like a lime-kiln, I'd sing to you. What, yer pore little 'ead is all 'ot an' aching like? Well, damned well serve you right, an' so's mine, an' it might be aching worse if it wasn't for me kind friend 'ere what put the nelson on you. Oh, you bad feller, turnin' so ferocious——"

He rambled on for ten minutes or so, and gradually the man quietened down and fell into a semi-stupor.

"We'll leave the lashin's on," Timms whispered. "He'll sleep for hours, an' he'll wake like a little

baby lamb. Lumme, but it ain't 'arf bin a thirsty business this—any more medicine to spare for a pore sick man, miss? "

"There is not," said Miss Howard. "Are you not content . . . to see what . . . isn't it . . ."

Tears came to her eyes, and she turned away and slowly went out. Of a sudden I realised what this business meant to her, to her plans, to her hopes. . . . She had made an enemy of the one man who could gain the skulls for her. Without the help of the diver, she might as well be back in England. If appearances went for anything, the Howard horse was scratched from the Forty Skulls Handicap, yet the idea brought no sense of exultation to me.

"Will he be safe, do you think? " I asked Timms. He mopped his brow.

"Gawd knows. If I was wiv' 'im when he waked maybe 'e'd coo like a baby wiv' a feedin' bottle. But if he wakes up an' sees the lady, and recollects what 'appened to that bottle of whisky—well—there might be a deal of trouble. 'E 'as a peculiar temperament, 'as 'Enry. 'E combines the tender soul of a young gel wiv the strength and passions of a ruddy bull. An' it is the bull as will be uppermost when 'e thinks of that whisky. It was a wicked thing; I can't abear to think of it."

The thought was painful to me too, and for a more intimate reason.

"Well, what do you suggest doing? " I asked.

"It's for you to be saying that," he answered.

"I've told you what I thinks of the situation, an' I

gives you a 'int of the complaint that 'as my dear ole friend 'Enry by the wheel. If you says to me, 'Come on, Timms, let's 'op it, an' go ashore an' 'ave a drink an' a bit of somefing to eat,' well, I comes an' never mind the poor young lady left alone wiv a madman, an' no one but that young bloke wiv the eye-glass and pretty 'ands to be lookin' after 'er. An' why shouldn't we? What's the lady doin' but trying to interfere wiv us? Ain't she a would-be murderess? Wouldn't she p'ison my whisky—if she ever give me any—wouldn't she stick a 'at pin—she's a terror is that girl—but—but—she's a bonny one, ain't she? If I was a young man like you an' I 'adn't got a face like I 'as an' a wife——”

“Oh, cut that!” I interrupted hastily, conscious that I was burning red as a monsoon sunset. “Our job's to find that wreck, and play the game with the doctor. But if you think that Trout may turn nasty—and Miss Howard agrees—you'd better stay with her awhile. We don't want murder on our hands, and your dear friend looks as though murder would come within the usual round of a day's work. Wait here, captain, and I'll see her.”

I found Miss Howard standing by the rails near our boat. Her eyes were wet, but they looked straight into mine.

“I'm dreadfully sorry——” I began.

She smiled.

“I don't see why you should be,” she answered, with a little catch in her voice. “It looks as though everything had been—very successful from your

point of view. I hope the brute didn't hurt you——"

"He didn't. But he's a dangerous chap. I say, I wish you'd be a little more reasonable, and not think that we're all pirates and trying to get at one another's throats. I apologise sincerely for all the rotten things I said—you know I was horribly worried that night, everything seemed to go wrong——"

"Do you still think I would take advantage of a sick man?" she interrupted.

"No, I know you wouldn't," I replied with conviction. "Do you still think that I arranged to maroon you?"

"I can hardly think that," she answered with a smile, "when I remember what happened after. I think I have misjudged you, Captain Cleveland, as much as you have misjudged me. But that won't help things much at present."

The smile had gone, and in its place came a look of despair that wrung my heart.

"It does," I cried impulsively. "It means everything to me—it means——" I hesitated, aware that my cheeks were burning again. "Look here, do try and believe in me. It's rotten luck, this business of the diver. But I don't think it is as bad as you imagine it to be. Timms knows your man quite well, and he's certain that he'll be all right when he's quietened down. Let Timms look after him. You've got to be awfully tactful with people like Trout. Timms knows exactly how to manage him. Will you let him stay on board?"

She did not answer for a time, but stood with

her head half turned and her eyes gazing towards Thunder Island. Then she spoke :

" You're very kind, I—I am horribly upset and afraid. It means such a lot to me. I'm a fool. . . . I'd be glad to have Captain Timms for a while, but is that fair to Doctor Flint? I should hate to embarrass you. . . . I told you before that Doctor Flint is trying to steal something from me, something that . . . well, you know what your duty is. It's too late now, I know, to show you that you are in the wrong. You don't understand. . . . We are enemies—I—I think you had better go—both of you."

She bit her lip and turned away again. Never was my sense of loyalty to Doctor Flint at a lower ebb than at that moment. I spoke huskily :

" Enemy or not, Miss Howard, I hope I've got some idea of decency left. There's no need for Timms to come on shore just now. If the doctor thinks I have played into your hands, I can assure him that Timms is just as capable of getting information out of you and Trout as you are out of him. The only thing that I ask is that you don't give him any whisky, and that he comes back to the island as soon as Trout is well. Is that agreeable? "

" Yes, yes, of course," she answered quickly. " Oh, I am grateful."

She held out her hand, but withdrew it quickly as Captain Timms himself appeared from the cabin hatch.

" How is he? " I asked.

" 'E'll do," said Timms, winking at me. " 'E'll

sleep for an hour maybe. An' then 'e'll wake up like a daisy on a bright June morning, all fresh an' wet with dew. An' that's more than Cap'n Timms 'll do wiv all the hard work 'e's done—in the 'ot sun, an' not a drop o' liquor to revive 'is drooping soul. But Trout may be fractious, lady. 'Don't anger 'im."

Briefly I explained my plan to Timms, not omitting to state that I wished him to remain temporarily teetotal.

"It's crool 'ard is that," was his opinion. "But never let it be said that Cap'n Timms wouldn't stand by a lady in distress. Of 'Enry I 'as my misdoubts, but I knows the steering gear of 'im better than any man. Leave 'im to me, miss, an' I'll take me dry an' lonely trick along wiv 'im."

So it was arranged, and I expressed my confidence in the captain by leaving him my half empty flask.

Miss Howard shook hands, and thanked me. Howard spoke with his usual superlative incoherence, and a few minutes later I stepped out of the boat on to the beach of Thunder Island.

Half way up the path I halted and sat down. For the last hour Doctor Flint had occupied but a small portion of my thoughts. He now loomed largely in them, and there came also a clearer general sense of perspective.

I made a mental analysis of the situation. First, it was quite apparent that I was falling in love with Patricia Howard. Second, that my relations with her had already placed me in an extremely awkward

position with regard to my employer. My duty to him had been clear. I should have left the Howards to look after their ruffian as best they might, and come ashore with Timms. We were absolute masters of the situation. Instead of taking advantage of it, I had done all I could to restore matters to the *status quo*. Had she been the adventuress I had first thought her to be, I could hardly have played my cards more foolishly.

Good Heavens ! *Had* she fooled me again ? Had all her talk of trusting and gratitude been a pose ? The thought was as an icy douche on the glow that had been in my heart the last hour. Oh, what a fool I was ! Love ? I was infatuated ! Her eyes, her voice, her courage, her tears, her helplessness—I could see now how cleverly she had used them all as weapons to my undoing. She had thrown a spell upon me. I had been as helpless as a rat hypnotised by a snake's evil eye.

I had betrayed my own friend. I had played false to a sick man !

I cursed myself, the girl, Timms, Trout—all of them, then I climbed the path like a truant dog, prepared to tell the doctor everything and take my licking.

I say it was my intention to tell the doctor exactly what had happened, and how the girl had fooled me. But the welcome he gave me entirely upset my plan. He was standing by his bed, his face beaming with joy.

"Ah, my boy," he cried excitedly, "at last ! You've got them ? Splendid—splendid ! I heard your shot. You've brought the case up—not

opened it? Ah! You've no idea how excited I've been. Come along, let me feel."

"What do you mean, sir?" I asked in bewilderment; and then the awful tragedy of it dawned on me. He had mistaken Miss Howard's shot for the pre-arranged signal—he believed that we had found the skulls. The sight of him standing there, his thin little body all bent up, his hands shaking, his face flushed with a happiness I must now take rudely from him, was heartbreaking in its pathos. I squirmed with shame to think how I had doubted and played false to him after all his kindness to me.

"Come on, old boy—I'm very impatient, don't keep me waiting."

I put my arms about him and led him to his chair.

"Doctor Flint," I faltered, "I'm sorry, we—we—were not successful. The shot was accidental. Miss Howard——"

"No, no," he shouted excitedly. "Come, come, old fellow, you mustn't joke with an old man. Captain Timms—he's following? Tell him to be quick. I can't wait."

He was trembling from head to foot.

"We haven't got the case, sir," I went on. "After we'd finished diving we passed the Howards' launch. Their diver is an old friend of Timms. We went on board and the two divers started drinking. Miss Howard objected. She fired accidentally. Timms is there now."

"You're lying, you're lying," the doctor cried in a paroxysm of rage. "The skulls are mine—

mine—mine. I won't be robbed. A plot—you're plotting—that damned woman—she's got you—the skulls—I will have them—I swear——"

He rose to his feet. I put out my arms just in time to save him from falling, and his frail body went limp in my embrace.

CHAPTER IX

FEMININE STRATEGY

I MUST have waited an hour by the doctor's bedside before there came the first sign of returning consciousness. He suddenly gripped my hand and tried to get up.

"Where are they—the skulls—where, where?" he muttered thickly.

"We'll find them, sir, don't you worry," I said. "Timms will be back later—we'll have another trip as soon as possible."

"Where is Timms?" he questioned.

My heart sank.

"He stayed behind, sir; the Howards' diver went off into a fit of passion. Timms knows how to manage him. I was afraid he might do the girl some harm, so I asked him to stay behind. I'm sorry, sir, if you—if I've——"

He rose up this time, pushing my arms away with incredible force, and almost screamed in his rage.

"She's got you—she's got you—you're in league with her—you've betrayed me. Get out—leave me alone—blind though I am—I'll beat you—I'll beat you all. Send Timms to me—we'll go together. We'll find the skulls. Damn you—I trusted you—you've gone to that woman."

"Doctor Flint," I interrupted, burning with

remorse, "Miss Howard and I are enemies. I'll admit I've been more friendly with her than I ought. I believe you now. Before, I thought you had misjudged her. I'm sorry—desperately sorry. But little harm's been done. They know nothing that we do not know ourselves. I'll not give her another chance. I swear to you that——"

"How can I trust you!" he interrupted. "I might have known. A woman—always a woman."

He fell back again, panting. I wetted a towel and put it to his burning head. He made no protest. He looked terribly ill. What could I do? I cursed myself. I cursed Patricia Howard. I found it easy to hate her now. I swore I would make up for my disloyalty to the doctor. She was to blame for everything. Sex, by Jove, the doctor was right. Where sex was concerned a man's sense of honour goes. I had thought I was proof against the wiles of a female. I had fallen to the very first trap. . . .

Would Timms never come back? I walked across to the top of the path. There was no sign of life from either dhow or launch. I stood there with my mind a cyclone. Then suddenly I became aware of a feeling of coldness. My flesh was creeping. I buttoned up my coat and walked back to the camp, knowing too well what that shivering sensation meant. I might have expected an attack of fever after my adventures in the swamp, and the hours of exposure to the sun. My head was aching. I took some quinine and then, succumbing to an intense feeling of lassitude, sat down by the doctor's side and wrapped a blanket around me. . . .

It was half-past five when Timms appeared.

"Hello," he shouted when he saw me. "What's this? You ain't ill? Blimey, here's a go—what's up?"

I explained as well as I could. He was sympathetic and suggested whisky hot and bed as treatment.

"Thanks," I said, "I've seen enough of you and your confounded whisky for one day, Timms. If it hadn't been for whisky, things might have been fairly normal. As it is, the doctor's had another relapse and it looks as though we'll have to chuck the whole show and get him back to Zanzibar without delay. All because of your damned thirst."

"All right, young man," he answered. "Rub it in. Blame ole Timms for everything and you won't go far wrong. But that's all past an' gone, for good or bad. What concerns us at present is the effects of my wrong doin's. The ole man's bad an' you're bad. Now you just obey orders for once, an' get to bed. If you won't have whisky, then you've got to 'ave some 'ot milk or somefing; and if you 'as a drop of whisky in it, it won't be the worse. Get to bed—or by the love o' Mike I'll put you there meself."

I was in no condition to resist him, and after he had helped me to undress he carried me to my bed like a child and tucked the blankets round me. I even took his hot milk and whisky and had sufficient grace to thank him for his kindness.

"How did you leave them on the launch?" I inquired.

"'Enry's all right," he replied. "Came to 'is senses quite orinary. Only 'e cries a bit—that bein' the way o' big fellers like 'im. Wanted 'is mammy first, an' then—mammy not bein' forth-comin'—'e asks to see the young lady an' say 'ow sorry 'e is. I fetches 'er, an' everyfing is squared up O.K. She thanks me very kindly, says I'm a generous kindly man to see 'er through 'er trouble. Thought she was goin' to give me a drink—but I was mistook."

He heaved a deep sigh and clicked his tongue in his cheek.

"Help yourself, captain," I said, nodding to the whisky, "and let your conscience measure the tot."

He helped himself liberally.

"A bit o' orl right," he cried, after he had drunk it. "You'd 'ave to go a long way to find a better boss n' Doctor Flint so far as the quality of 'is whisky's concerned. Of the quantity I say nothing. A bit o' orl right. . . . And now, young man, just you listen to me." He sat down and filled his pipe. "From what I've seen o' you, you're a well-eddicated sort o' chap what's got quite a good 'elpin' o' common sense. But where you're wantin'—an' Cap'n Timms is bold enough to say it—is in experience of the opposite sex. When it comes to women—you lose your steering—you flops an' wallows—you goes full steam astern, you goes to port and then to starboard, and the result is that you gets nowheres at all. What you wants, young man, is a pilot—one who's 'ad years o' sailing in the perilous seas o' sex—an' *that pilot 'appens to be me.*" He slapped

his hand to his knee in emphasis, and winked broadly.

"Go on, captain," I said. "Let's hear the worst."

My head was beginning to swim with the quinine I had taken, and although I had more than an inkling of what he was driving at, I was in no humour for argument.

"Women," he continued, "is peculiar creatures an' they takes a vast more understanding than a full-rigged ship."

"You've sailed a lot, I suppose?"

"I've sailed enough to give me a good understanding o' their tricks."

"Now over there's as bonny a schooner as ever shipped from port," he pointed away to the lagoon. "A schooner as any skipper might be proud to sail. And it looks to me as though that little schooner is waitin' for a master." He winked again, apparently well pleased with his metaphor.

"But you were talking about pilots," I said.

"So I was," he answered. "That little schooner, if I knows anything, is riding among the rocks. Given plenty of sea room an' I knows the man I'd give the berth o' master to. Broad seas and fair winds an' maybe a gale or two I'll lay he'll manage; but them rocks and mazy channels—that's where the pilot comes in—the pilot that 'as the deeper knowledge of experience."

"What about Durban," I inquired, "and the ship whose cable you slipped?"

"That weren't a ship—it were a bloomin' coal 'ulk," he replied stiffly—"a blamin' coal 'ulk."

I'm talking about ships—ships as can sail—ships as is beautiful to God an' the eyes o' man. Or if you prefers orinary language, I'm talking about that young gel over there. I've been thinking a lot about that gel lately." The captain meditatively put a match to his pipe.

"You're not the only one," I said.

"That fact also 'as not escaped my observation. A gel like that would make any man think—least-ways any man what's got eyes in 'is 'ead. But at present there is other things to think about as well. You've got to get up in the crow's nest if you wants to look all round you, and that's just what Cap'n Timms 'as been a-doin' of. Castin' 'is eyes to the 'orizon."

A sudden moaning from the doctor's bed caused the captain to get up and move across to him. He was back in a minute.

"He's mortal bad," he announced. "I don't like the looks o' things at all."

I got up, but the captain gently but firmly pushed me down again.

"Nah, then, you keep still. No need for you to go fussin' about wiv 'im. Don't want two o' you raving about dead men's 'eads. You just take yer orders from me for once. Lie still an' listen. For the last five minutes I've been a trying to explain to you the view I gets from the crow's nest. Now I'm goin' to put things a bit more plain."

I felt glad, but made no remark.

"This is what I sees—I sees two parties o' people a strugglin' an' fussin' an' 'aving great goin's on

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over the findin' o' what to my 'umble mind is nothin' but a box o' rotten bones——"

He took the pipe from his mouth and replaced it with a quid of tobacco—a procedure which I had noted before was significant of a very serious state of mind.

"Rotten bones," he continued. "An' what's it brought us to? Here's the old man 'ere as sick as a pysined dawg. Here's you a shivering wiv fever. Here's my mate, 'Enry, as good a natured man in ordinary circumstances as ever drunk a pint o' bitter, sufferin' from the depressin' effects of a murderous passion. An' there's that bonny gel, all strung up an' most un'appy just a-pinin' for the lovin' and comfortin' arms of a good an' honest man. Blarst it," and his voice rose, "'ere's two parties of otherwise decent God-fearin' people all a-goin' clean crazy over a box o' rotten bones! It ain't sense, I tell you."

"What's your proposition, then?" I asked.

"My proposition," he echoed. "Why, what I propose is a treaty o' peace—a joining o' forces for the common good. If this blinking business goes on as it does, it's a matter o' chance alone as to which party finds the wreck, and the chances are that when it is found every one of us will be off 'is rocker. Now if it's a treaty o' peace, we draw lots or we tosses up, as to which party shall rest and which shall work, an' the understandin' bein' that if the box is found we likewise tosses up as to which shall 'ave it. Ain't that sense? Ain't that damned good common sense?"

I did not answer.

"Of course it is. There can be no disputin' of it. An' the first good that comes o' the treaty is that you an' the ole man 'ere instead of groanin' an' sweatin' and gradually gettin' iller, will 'ave the benefit of a 'ighly skilled an' pretty nurse."

"What the deuce do you mean?" I cried in alarm.

"Precisely what I says," he answered calmly. "That gel, as I says, is pinin' for the lovin' care of a man. Now I knows enough about women to know that when they can't get love, the next best thing is for them to give it. When you gets to my age you'll a' learnt that a woman is 'appiest when she's a-doin' somefing for somebody else—an' when that somebody 'appens to——"

"Oh, for goodness' sake shut up!" I cried in exasperation. "You're talking utter rubbish. The girl's made a bigger fool of you than she has of me—which is saying a mighty lot. The doctor hates her like poison—so do I. It may be a box of rotten bones we are after, but as you'll admit that's not your concern, and it's not mine. If that girl comes anywhere near the camp, there will be a row. I suppose really it's her own suggestion. She tried it on before. I should have thought you'd have been up to her little game instead of coming here maudlin about pilots and bonny schooners and what not. She'd have us all on little bits of string, if we'd all had the same experience of perilous seas as you have."

Now perhaps this last remark was hardly fair, in view of my own lamentable submission to Patricia

Howard's subtlety, but in the urgency of my desire to convince Timms of the awful nature of his proposition, I did not worry to be honest. He was taken aback by my vehemence, and I carried on.

"Good Lord! you don't really propose that she should come along here and nurse us both? Don't you realise that that's just helping her to play her own game? Don't you see through it? You'd have the doctor in an apoplectic fit. The sight of her alone would drive me mad. I may be a fool, Captain Timms, but I do know when to draw the line, and I draw a mighty particular one round this camp to-night."

"So, so," he answered very mildly. "It's not for the likes of an ordinary seafaring man to argue again' so much eddication and experience. You knows, young man, you knows what's best. You knows 'ow to make yer pillow comfortable, an' 'ow to change yer wet clothes when the sweat's got you, an' 'ow to make nice cool drinks, an' the sweet comforting things to say to yerself when the pain is rackin' of your body. And so does the ole man there. You don't want no nurse, no bonny nurse, wiv nice soft 'ands and a scent about 'er 'air as she bends over you to give you somefing nice an' cool. Well, all I can say is God 'elp you both—for you ain't learnt yet what's the best thing that life can give a man."

He got up, and without another word walked out into the dusk. I called him. He was hurt, I could tell, and while my mind was firm as to the utter impossibility of his suggestion, I should have

liked to tell him that I was not lacking in appreciation of his kindheartedness. But he did not answer.

Very shakily I got out of bed and went across to Doctor Flint. He was sleeping, muttering a little, but not delirious. I tripped over something on my way back, and was so weak I had to go the remainder of the distance on my hands and knees. My head was throbbing and aching terribly. My whole body felt as though it had been run over by a steam roller. I shall never forget the relief of getting into bed again, and of draining to the last cool drop the jug of water Timms had placed near to hand.

Dear old Timms! He was a fool, yet his heart was wonderfully kind. In spite of my fever I could not help chuckling at his simile of the beautiful little schooner riding among the rocks and waiting for a master. Master, indeed! Patricia Howard looked like being the master of the lot of us. I hated her. I kept on telling myself that I hated her, yet the spell her beauty had cast upon me hung in my memory like the scent of a rose—tantalising, unsatisfying, alluring.

A very uncomfortable hour passed, and although I called repeatedly there came no sign of Captain Timms. I was aware of an extraordinary feeling of loneliness. I wanted someone to talk to. The silence of the camp was terrible. Even the doctor had ceased to mumble. I got up and looked at him, half expecting to find him dead. But his breathing, though shallow, was steady. Apparently he had passed the crisis of his sickness.

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For the life of me I could not understand what had happened to Timms. He was not the sort to go and mope over an imagined injury. Besides, he knew I wanted him. . . . He might have had an accident, I thought—fallen down the cliff path. Very unsteadily I walked to the top of it and called. . . .

Ah ! at last—an answering hail. From the beach it came, and the sound too of a boat being run up on to the sand. Evidently he had been out to the dhow. I sat down to wait for him. I was far too exhausted to get back to camp unassisted.

Several minutes passed before I heard footsteps on the path. I shouted :

“ Is that you, captain ? ”

“ Aye, aye,” came the answer. “ What are you a-doin’ of there ? Is that obeying orders ? ” and then in a lower voice : “ Be careful, miss, keep more to the right.”

Good Lord ! He had Miss Howard with him ! I stood up, mad with rage, and promptly fell on to my knees. Before I could recover Timms was bending over me, and Patricia Howard was by my side.

“ Here he is, miss. A nice sort o’ patient for you. More than I can manage. Come, lad, the young lady’s here to look after you. Don’t be fractious. Just do as she tells you.”

“ You silly boy,” I heard her say, but her voice seemed miles and miles away. “ Just fancy your getting up like this. Carry him, Captain Timms. Wait, I’ll help.”

She put a strong supple arm underneath my

shoulders, and her head came so near my own that her hair touched my cheek. I had the sensation of being drugged—drugged against my will, and with what will I had I fought against it.

"I'm all right," I said, "I don't want any help. I appreciate your kindness, Miss Howard, I must refuse. Captain Timms had no right to bring you. . . . Please go back. I refuse absolutely——"

"All right, miss, I've got 'im," the captain said, lifting me in his arms. "If you'll go ahead—there's 'is bunk. It ain't very tidy."

I struggled with all my remaining strength to get away, but he squeezed me as though I were a kicking baby.

"Now, now, keep quiet then."

"Leave go, damn you," I shouted. "You damned interfering old fool. Make her go back. I won't have her within an inch of me."

"Avast there, you'll be awaking the doctor. And then there'll be trouble."

"And who's making it?" I retorted. "Miss Howard, I refuse absolutely to have you in the camp. The doctor has given explicit orders——"

"Never mind 'im, miss," Timms interrupted. "I'll answer for that. All right, I'll 'old 'im till yer finished."

We were in the shelter now. Miss Howard was making my bed. She was dressed in white—a duck skirt and a blouse made of some filmy material, cut low at the neck and secured by a pebble brooch.

She wore no hat, and her glorious hair glinted in the light like coils of old gold wire.

She looked up for a moment and smiled. I avoided her eyes, knowing too well what effect they had on my courage.

"Just one moment, Captain Timms," she said. "I'm sure he's never had his bed properly made since you landed here. . . . Now, that's all right. Come on, you silly boy, try and remember what you said to me this afternoon, and don't be so cross."

Remember? I had done nothing else ever since but think and worry over my afternoon's idiocy.

"Thank you, I'm not cross," I said with as much dignity as I could muster. "I'm angry—and I should be very much obliged if you would go back to your launch—at once. I am even prepared to dispense with the services of Captain Timms if he will escort you. Probably you do not realise——"

"Never mind what 'e says," Timms interrupted, lowering me on to the bed. "'Is mind ain't working normal."

"It's working a damned sight more normally than yours," I blazed. "Get out of it; I don't want to see you again. Clear out, you damned old humbug."

"Please—please," Miss Howard put in, and then turning to the captain: "Wait outside a moment."

Timms went out chuckling, and I felt as a marooned man might at the sight of a ship's topmast sinking behind the horizon.

"Timms," I shouted helplessly.

"'Ush! 'ush!" he replied from the darkness, "be a good lad."

Surely my cup was filled to overflowing. My head was bursting, I perspired with fever. My limbs ached so that I could hardly bear the weight of the blankets on them, and my thoughts tortured more than the rack and the thumb-screws of the Spanish Inquisition. Oh, if only this girl would go away and leave me to myself. . . .

"Now I think you'll be all right," she said very softly. "Just tell me what's the matter. I'm going to stay, so you must stop worrying about that. Have you had fever before? . . . I think it's the sun. . . . I'm sure it's not malaria——"

"I don't see that it matters whether it's the sun or chicken pox," I interrupted. "I refuse absolutely to allow you to stay here. Please go back——"

Before I could stop her she had put a thermometer under my tongue.

"Don't you dare to break it," she commanded. "It's the only one I have. I want you to keep it there for half a minute."

She turned away, and I heard the squeak of a bottle stopper. Then she bent over me again and put on my burning forehead a handkerchief soaked in eau-de-Cologne. Oh, the divine comfort of it!

"Is it cool?" she murmured. "Lie perfectly still, and your headache will be gone in no time. Now the thermometer. I'm sure it's going to be a most terrific reading . . ." She held it up to

the light. "Oh, not so bad as I thought. You're not really dying, Captain Cleveland, though I'm sure you deserve to—getting out of bed in that idiotic manner, and exciting yourself over nothing at all. Have you taken any quinine?"

I nodded.

"Well, I don't think there was any need, it's only made your head worse. You've got a chill, that's all. The sun, and getting wet. I'm going to give you some aspirin, and then you are going to sleep."

"I'm afraid I'm not," I retorted, fighting now with my back against the wall. "Please take this scent away; I find it rather——"

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she answered serenely, taking the handkerchief away. "It evaporates so quickly in this climate. But I've heaps—we'll try it this way." She poured a teaspoonful of the fragrant spirit into her hands and began gently to massage my brow and temples.

My head sank back into the pillow. My body relaxed. I yielded to her soothing touch as a man yields to morphia.

I was beaten.

"Does it soothe you?" she whispered softly.

"It's just heaven," I answered slowly, and cursed myself for having said it.

"That's all right, then," she continued softly—so softly that I could hardly hear. "You are just going to fall asleep—into a heavy dreamless sleep. It's no good sleeping if you are going to dream, is it? You're just going to sleep. You're not even going to have any aspirin. Just falling

asleep, asleep, asleep——” Her voice trailed away into the low murmur of tinkling bells, and my soul floated up into the kindly darkness of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER X

THE DIVERS STRIKE

“O H, 'e's all right, sir, don't you worry. Slept like a pig all night. 'E's bin doin' too much, gettin' 'ot in the sun, then gettin' 'is clothes wet, an' refusin', in spite of all I tells 'im, to take a reasonable amount of stimulant. You've got to go careful in a climate like this.”

“Yes, yes—you're right, I believe, my dear captain . . . Give me a hand, will you? I'll go over to him. Dear me, I'm very weak. I'll have a little whisky, I think. What is this smell—this scent? My handkerchief—I can't think how——”

“Oh, that? Eau-de-Cologne, sir. I 'ad a little in my bag, an' I thinks last night, when the fever was on you, that it might cool your 'ed. I gave a drop to the boy, too. Did 'im a lot o' good. Said it reminded 'im of 'is mother, an' took 'im back to the nursery. Nothin' like a drop o' scent for stirring up yer memories. I remember once when I was——”

“Yes—yes—but I wish you wouldn't use the stuff on me. I don't like it. Damnable stuff it is. I'd rather you didn't bring it near me. Please put that handkerchief in the fire. . . . Ugh!”

I opened my eyes. It was broad daylight. . . . I sat up and blinked. . . . Then it had been a dream—Miss Howard coming on shore last night.

Only a dream, but what an extraordinarily vivid one it was! Even now I could feel the soft touch of her hand on my forehead—the low croon of her voice bidding me sleep. The scent of eau-de-Cologne lingered on my pillow. It seemed almost unbelievable that it was Captain Timms who had dabbed it on my burning brow, and sent me off into that half-hypnotic trance. I felt now as fit as I had ever done, only just a little tired. . . .

I got out of bed, and then the captain appeared.

"Hello!" he cried. "Gettin' under way? Now you just take it easy. Sit down while I brings you somefing to eat. You ain't well yet by a long chalk. Don't you get foolin' about."

"Thanks," I answered; "but I'm quite all right. Wasn't malaria, after all, apparently. Tell me what happened. I have a hazy recollection of going queer all of a sudden, and then—oh yes—you cleared off—what happened?"

The captain put a finger to his lips.

"Go easy," he whispered. "The ole man don't know about the gel, and thing's 'll be better if 'e don't find out. 'E's a bit suspicious now. 'E smells that eau-de-Cologne when 'e wakes, an' goes for me like 'ell. You see, she went in to see him after you goes off to sleep, an' sits beside 'im——"

"Damnation!" I cried. "Then you did fetch the girl—you—oh——"

"'Ush! 'ush! the old man——"

The doctor was moving about.

"'E wants to see you," Timms whispered. "Not a word for the love o' Gawd. She went back first thing—said she'd like to have a talk wiv you

private some time soon. I'll fix it ; you just leave it to me."

"Leave it to you," I muttered, finding it very hard indeed to keep my voice down. "Look here; Timms, I'd like you to know once and for all that I can manage my own affairs, and that I'm damn well going to. Don't you see what you've done? Don't——"

Words failed me. I could not find a decent swear or combination of swears adequately to express my feelings. Miss Howard had come ashore—she had made an abject fool of me again, and, worse than anything, she had successfully carried out her original plan of having the delirious doctor to herself. . . . I took hold of my pillow and hurled it savagely out of the hut.

"Captain Timms," I cried, "if——"

He seized me by the arms.

"'Ush! the doctor——"

"Cleveland, old fellow, is that you?" came the doctor's voice. "I'm glad you're better. . . . Come, captain, give me a hand ; I'd like to walk across."

The captain went to his assistance, and half a minute later the two of them appeared. The doctor looked quite his old self again, although he seemed very shaky on his legs. I shook his hand.

"Ha," he said, "we're not dead yet, are we, old fellow?"

"Not a bit of it," I answered. "Never saw you look better in your life, sir." I led him to my bed and he sat down, but immediately got up again.

"Ugh!" he said, "that filthy smell here too. Dear me, I wish you hadn't squirted your damnable

stuff everywhere, Captain Timms. The whole place wants fumigating. Where did you put that formalin ? ”

The formalin was still in the dhow with the rest of the stores, so the doctor passed me the cigars instead.

“ Ah, that’s better,” he remarked, sitting down on the bed again. “ I cannot imagine anything more offensive to the nostrils of a decent man than the smell of scent.”

The captain winked at me. I ignored him.

“ And now,” Doctor Flint continued, “ we must discuss our plans. Tell me how you are feeling, Cleveland.” He felt my pulse.

“ Fit for anything,” I said.

“ Yes, yes, a slight chill ; you don’t seem any the worse. Yet you must be careful, old fellow ; I shouldn’t like you to be ill. Keep out of the sun as much as you can. . . . You—you are going to dive again to-day, Captain Timms—this morning—everything is ready ? ”

As the captain appeared to hesitate, I answered for him.

“ Of course, sir, we’re ready to start at once. What about going down now, captain ? Any signs of the other people beginning operations ? ”

“ No,” he replied. “ There is no sign of the other folks a-startin’—an’——” he spoke very slowly and deliberately—“ an’ there won’t be ! ”

“ Why ? ” the doctor asked quickly. “ What has happened ? ”

“ What ’as ’appened ? ” the captain echoed.
“ A vast of things ’as ’appened.”

The doctor jumped to his feet and shouted hoarsely.

"They've found the wreck——"

"No, they 'aven't," answered the captain coolly. "They ain't found the wreck, an' they won't find it—an' no one else will—until things is arranged different to what they are. Sit down, sir, 'an I'll explain the situation."

Trembling, the doctor sat down, and the captain threw away his cigar and bit off a quid of tobacco. His eyes were twinkling. Apparently he derived keen enjoyment from the dramatic effect his announcement had produced.

"The fact o' the matter is, gentlemen, there's a strike on—a strike of divers." He walked to the side of the hut, spat, and came back.

The doctor laughed.

"The captain's having a little joke with us, Cleveland, but——"

"Little joke?" the captain echoed. "That depends. From what I've seen of you, sir, you're a good-natured gent and so's the young gentleman too, only 'e's a bit 'asty wiv 'is tongue. I don't want to cause no ill-feeling, and if you regards the proposition that I am about to put before you wiv the same kindness of 'eart as you've shown throughout the voyage, why, well and good, it's a joke all round, an' I 'opes we'll be a-drinkin' to it before the sun gets too 'igh to take the coolness off the liquor. For I 'ope the situation's not so desperate as to prevent an honourable settlement bein' reached at once."

"Rubbish!" said the doctor impatiently. "This

is no time for joking. Come, I'd like you to get on with the diving."

But the captain was not joking. I saw that from the first. There was something very serious behind this mockery.

"The divin'," he answered, "can wait. The first thing is to 'ave an understandin' between the parties concerned in the dispute."

"Dispute?" the doctor demanded angrily. "What are you talking about? Oblige me by getting on with your work. If it's a matter of wages——"

"It ain't," came the smooth response. "It's a matter o' principle and common sense."

"Then let's have your statement," I put in, "and for goodness' sake cut the humour. There's been too much of it floating round the camp these last twenty-four hours. What are you to begin with—a kind of Band of Hope?"

The captain laughed uproariously.

"Blimey, you've got it first time. A blinkin' Band of Hope, and the members of it is my honourable self and 'Enry Trout."

"And what's your chief hope," I said. "Whisky unlimited?"

He stopped grinning.

"Young man," he said, "you've got it first time. The problem is liquor—liquor in relation to the 'ealth and general well bein' of the two persons qualified to find and salve that blinkin' wreck an' its cargo of rotten bones. Liquor, I says, is the most important thing. Next comes the matter of hours—hours of work an' hours o' liquor. I've

already made it clear to you—but I'll say it over again for the benefit of the doctor—that it's a matter of chance, and chance alone, as to which of us finds that wreck first. That bein' so, what is the use of us sweatin' ourselves to death in this reckless fashion? The wreck, if it's been there six years, ain't likely to 'op it within the next few weeks. Then go easy, says I. This morning meself an' Trout, what came ashore an hour ago, 'ad a long an' serious talk. It was agreed between us that I should come along an' 'ave a talk—— ”

“What about the other party?” I asked.

“The other party 'as been approached,” the captain answered.

“And the result?”

“Not too good, not so good as we 'oped. The gel says she's thrown all 'er liquor overboard after yesterday's carrying on. 'Enry don't believe 'er, an' says 'e'll search the ship. But that's another matter. I tells you our 'and is strong. An' I tells you definite, that if the control of all liquor in this camp is not 'anded over legally an' official like to us, it will be my painful duty to recommend that the strike stays on.”

“Utter rubbish!” the doctor cried. “Have you taken leave of your senses? What's the matter with him, Cleveland? He's drunk.”

“He's not drunk,” I said. “He simply wants to be. How much diving do you intend to do if your—er—hope regarding the liquor is realised?”

“Ah!” he answered “Now we comes to a very important point. 'Enry an' me 'ave discussed that too. We ain't fools. On a job like this rest

is just as important as 'avin' the right amount of spirituous liquor. We decided to work a day on and a day off each. And the one that's on don't 'ave more than two drinks till sundown. We decides that as soon as the wreck is found that the one that finds it lets the other know—that we works together—and when the box o' bones comes aboard, it's got to be tossed up for by the parties that wants it. That's what I calls a common-sense arrangement, an' I 'opes that after givin' it due consideration you will agree. I leaves you to think about it."

He went out, whistling softly.

"What does he mean?" the doctor demanded. "Are you sure he's not drunk?"

"I'm sure he's not drunk, but I wouldn't be surprised if he'd had a drink this morning."

I had just caught sight of a corkless bottle neck projecting indiscreetly from under the diver's pillow.

"As for his meaning," I continued, "I think it's pretty clear. Where whisky is concerned, Timms is hardly normal. I remember you saying the same thing yourself, sir. We've still got three and a half cases—that fact being known to our friend is sufficient to keep him restless, so long as his ration remains at the present average of half a dozen drinks a day. In other words he's a drunkard, and however good his heart may be, I think we must regard this idiotic proposition and threat of his seriously."

"But—it's criminal," the doctor said somewhat lamely.

"Yes, but I imagine that he's thinking that this

whole business is—well—not, strictly speaking, legal. And whether he is or not, the fact remains that we're cut off from all communications, that it is your policy not to make the object of the expedition public, and that we are absolutely dependent upon his assistance in finding the wreck. Of course I'll go down myself if necessary, but I think that is lessening our chances."

"Yes, yes, of course," he answered thoughtfully, chewing away at his cold cigar. "We shall have to come to some arrangement. It is very trying. I am very worried indeed."

"Let me have another try with him, sir," I said. "Will you give me a free hand to bargain?"

"Certainly—of course. Offer him anything. I'll give him a hundred pounds when the wreck is found. I'd give him the whisky, but—but—that would make things worse. Talk to him, old fellow; try and persuade him."

I felt a little weak about the knees, but I slipped on my coat and topee and walked out. Timms was busy with the fire.

"Well," he said, "and do you bear the olive branch in your hands?"

"If you prefer that to vine leaves—yes," I answered. "Look here, Timms, let's talk sense."

I sat down on a case.

"I'm always willing to talk," he said. "You'll always find the captain a most reasonable fellow when 'e's treated rightly."

"I'm sure of that," I said amiably, "and it's the old man's intention to treat you rightly. Would you like a drink now?"

He looked up at me quickly.

"No," he replied with a degree of hesitation, "I'm a-goin' to 'ave a bite o' somefing to eat."

He turned to his bacon. "Besides," he added, "until this dispute is settled, I asks no favours of any one. I prefers to go dry. 'As the old man agreed to the proposition I puts before 'im?"

"He's given me a free hand," I repeated. "You are now dealing with me."

He was about to answer when a sudden breeze gave him a lungful of smoke and bacon fumes, and set the frying-pan on fire. He jumped up coughing.

"Blarst this life," he muttered.

"It's rotten," I said sympathetically, and fetched a bottle of whisky and two glasses. I extracted the cork in front of him. He changed his position and went on frying.

"I want to discuss things calmly with you," I continued, "and just to show you that there is no ill feeling"—I poured out a couple of tots—"I'm going to drink to your health. One can talk better when one's throat is not parched. Here's to you, captain, the best of everything."

"Thankee," he said without enthusiasm. "Blarst this bacon."

"There's better stuff than bacon to be had," I murmured softly.

"So I see," he answered.

"Darned good stuff, you know. The old man knows a thing or two about whisky."

"I've noticed it more'n once."

"You've got to go careful in a climate like this."

"I'm a-goin' careful."

There was a pause, during which the frying-pan caught fire again and the bacon went west. The captain got up.

"Look 'ere, young man, you're a-gettin' at me. This ain't discussin'. Leave me to cook the meal. You're gettin' on me nerves; I'm all high strung."

"Rubbish," I said. "Have a drink. I'm not trying to dope you. As a matter of fact the doctor and I have had it out pretty strong over this whisky business. He'd like to have us all teetotal to the end of the trip. Naturally I don't think much of your palling up with Trout. That's not the game, to my idea. We've both signed on for a job, and it's up to us to carry it through. But whisky's another matter. And it's a matter that can be arranged."

His eyes lighted up.

"Now you're talkin'—you're talkin' sense. . . . I'll drink with you on that."

He drank—without swallowing. I passed him the bottle.

"Help yourself; it's yours."

"No more now," he protested, wiping his beard with his hairy arm. "But I thanks you all the same. . . . Did I hear you say it was mine—the bottle?"

"If you'd care to have it," I replied. "And there's another when that's finished."

A look of suspicion came to his face.

"An' what are the terms—what's the arrangement? Are you 'anding over the lot?"

"Not exactly," I said. "The whisky's been made over to me. If you think I'm going to give

you the lot, and leave myself and the doctor to drink rain water, you're jolly well too hopeful.

"Neither do I see my way to supplying friend Trout with free liquor—not stuff like this. It's much too good for you, let alone for him. My terms are that you carry on with your job, and when that's done and there's no more diving possible, you can help yourself. You're a man of honour, Captain Timms, and I trust you."

"I don't let me pals down," he answered. "It's a matter of principle."

"It's a mighty rotten principle that lets you let us down—for a dirty brute like Trout. Perhaps that hadn't occurred to you."

Timms looked uncomfortable.

"We're old pals is me and Trout—that's where the difference comes in ; an' we belongs to the same perfesshun. The pore fellow's got his faults, same as any of us. An' he's got 'is good points too. Why, see 'im yesterday when he got rampageous ! You wouldn't think it was possible that 'e could be as soft spoken as 'e was this morning—aye, and to the young gel too.

"It was a pathetic sight to see 'im. 'E promised 'er to go teetotal for the rest of the voyage an' never lose 'is temper an' never do nothin' but work an' sleep. An' 'e meant it too. . . .

"Wasn't till 'e falls foul o' me by meself that 'e gets thinkin' over things. Of course that gel 'as got a way wiv 'er, an' no mistake."

"And apparently you've got a way with you too," I said. "Why go and put thoughts of whisky into his head when he's become so pure ? "

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"I didn't," replied Timms frankly. "He smelt me bref. . . . No, I stands by Trout," he added sententiously. "I stands by me promises."

I got up.

"Righto," I said. "Stand by them. I suppose it's not your intention to try and take that whisky—by—er—force?"

He laughed.

"Lor Lumme, we ain't pirates."

"Good. Well, then you've got my answer. There's no more whisky going till diving begins. I've no doubt that bottle will last until lunch time. You'll be feeling the effects of the climate to-night. I needn't remind you that you've got to go careful—your health, you know, and what not."

I turned to go, but he stopped me.

"Go easy. You know we ain't discussed things yet. We ain't explored every avenoo as might lead to an amicable settlement of this 'ere dispute. Sit down and 'ave one wiv me, seeing as how your generosity 'as placed the bottle at my disposal."

"Thanks," I answered. "But I've got a job to do and I want to keep a clear head."

"Oh?" he questioned.

"Yes," I replied. "I suppose you have no objection to my using the diving apparatus. I told you that I've had a few lessons. I daresay I could soon get my hand in."

He scratched his head.

"You're a clever young bloke, you are, but I shouldn't like to see you drownd yourself. Sit down. Let's 'ave a talk."

"It's no use, captain. The tide's all right this

morning, and we're all ready for work. Get busy and there'll be a bottle of whisky when we get ashore. There'll also be a hundred pounds when the wreck's found. Are you on to it or not?"

He poured himself out a very liberal tot, and after he had dealt with it——

"It's agen me principles. It's agen all the things I fixed up with me friend 'Enry. But circumstances is circumstances. An' 'Enry will be the first to see it. I'll 'ave to 'ave a pow-wow wiv 'im. If I earns that bottle o' whisky, or if I earns that 'undred quid, Trout's got a call on it. I don't let me pals down, I don't."

"Then you'll carry on?"

"Aye," he answered slowly. "When we've 'ad a bite o' somefing to eat."

I returned to the doctor and explained the situation. I could not join in his enthusiasm, however. True, we might find the wreck very quickly, we might find it in the morning, but the chances were that we should have to carry on for a long time yet.

I had my grave misgivings about Timms. My victory had been clearly bought. Even a man of his capacity could not stand a week of this climate at a bottle and a half of whisky a day. We might dilute each bottle as we issued it, I thought, but he would be a difficult man to fool. If we set the stuff on fire and destroyed it, we should still be up against the old problem.

By himself, Timms might have been reasonable, but now that he had this scoundrel Trout in tow he was nothing but a stark opportunist.

Again, there was the Egyptian to be considered.

He was not the sort of man to give up the chance without a big effort. There would be other dhows in Zanzibar. Any moment now he might appear and add to our complications.

Timms gave a shout that breakfast was cooked, and I helped him to bring it in to the shelter. He despatched his speedily, and then excused himself. Trout was waiting on the beach, he explained, and he wished to have a talk with him.

He was gone nearly half an hour, and returned with a worried look on his face.

"'Enry don't like it," he announced. "I had a hard job to convince 'im I was acting for the best. 'E's gone off furious, I 'ad to give 'im that bottle—'e's a corker an' no mistake, is 'Enry."

"Never mind, my dear captain," put in the doctor, "you'll not lose by it, I assure you. . . . You'll be starting now, I trust? Are you sure you feel up to it, Cleveland? It's splendid of you—of you both. Ah, I think you'll be successful this time. I am sure of it. Don't worry about me; I shall be quite all right."

Timms, still looking worried, set off for the beach, and I followed him down as soon as I had made the doctor comfortable.

We got into the boat and rowed out to the dhow. Hamzar greeted us pleasantly. In spite of my earlier suspicions, I had begun to have a liking for this evil-looking old Arab. He had a sense of humour. He asked me quietly if the sail was not but a poor protection against the fierceness of the sun, and whether I should not like his men to cut grass and lay it on top.

"It is hot here, too, Great Master," he added, with a delightful shrug of his shoulders. "But then the black man is accustomed to discomfort."

I did not tell him that we had taken the tent for other reasons than sheltering us from the sun, but said he was at liberty to send his men ashore for material to build a shade on the boat.

We picked a couple of sailors, shipped the diving gear and rowed out towards the channel. As we neared the launch I saw that Trout was sitting on deck, already half clad in his diving suit, and Miss Howard chatting gaily to him.

CHAPTER XI

THE MYSTERY OF FISH ISLAND

WHAT doubts I had as to Captain Timms' honesty were dispelled during the morning. He worked with a will. We started at the spot where we had left off the previous day, and keeping to the old plan of exploring the sea-bed in sections, we covered a very large area. Apart from another piece of water-logged wood, however, he brought up nothing of interest. The dhow, if she had not broken up completely, had drifted a considerable distance from the spot where she had foundered.

It was very disappointing ; yet I confess I found consolation of a sort in the fact that the Howards' search had proved similarly fruitless. The launch had kept a little north of us—never within speaking distance ; but near enough for me to see all that was going on. Apparently Miss Howard and Trout were on excellent terms once more. Howard did not come on deck while I was watching. Timms told me that he was not well.

"Can't get my bearings of that bloke yet," he remarked, during a spell between diving. "'E talks like a silly young schoolgirl, an' looks a damn sight sillier, an' yet I 'ave a sort o' feelin' that 'e's got more than a proper share o' the devil in 'im. The gel seems to 'ave 'im on a string. Looks to

me like a case of a reformed rake, an' 'ard case goin' soft . . . but 'e's still fond of a drop," he added.

I did not tell Timms how near he had come to the truth in his estimate of Charles Howard's character. His words produced temporarily a curious softening in my attitude towards the girl, whom I had such good reason to dislike. Sentiment, of all the human emotions, is the easiest played upon, and there is more of it in the heart of the average young man than most people would guess. The feeling of distrust and annoyance bred of last night's affair melted into sympathy as I thought of the agony she had gone through, her wounded pride, the bold effort she was making to clear her family honour—and hardened into rage again as I pictured the man himself, weak, foolish and self-indulgent, so strongly opposed to her in type.

I found it hard to believe that they came of the same line, yet Nature has a way of confounding all our theories of heredity and breeding. Physically there was nothing but a fleeting resemblance between brother and sister; a subtle similarity in the way they smiled, mentally they were as wide apart as the poles.

Yet, though Miss Howard had unconsciously engaged my sympathy again, there was no weakening in my resolve to keep her at a safe distance. I had learned my lesson. She was a woman of very great charm, and she was out to win—apparently at any cost. I did not blame her. The situation had demanded strategy, and she had played the game for all she was worth. If I had been made

to look an abject idiot in the process, well, that *was* the game!

It was somewhere about one o'clock when we decided to give up the search for the day. The captain was utterly fatigued, and his patience was beginning to wear a little thin. The Howards' had already ceased work. I had no desire to pay a call upon them, and as soon as I had got Timms clear of his suit we started for the beach.

"The bottom's too 'ard," he explained to the disappointed doctor, after he had drunk a well-earned whisky and water. "If only there was sand, she wouldn't 'a' budged an inch after she foundered. She'd 'a' got her timbers in an' stayed there till the worms ate 'er away. But when you 'as nothing but a 'ard bottom an' a strong tide, she's bound to shift. If we find that wreck, I'll lay it'll be in some spot where the tide runs slack an' where there's a sump o' mud or sand."

I took out the map.

There was nothing to indicate the existence of any such place within the area of the dhow's possible drift.

"Then she's bound to be near Fish Island," the captain went on, "that is if she's anywhere at all, an' not broken up into splinters. These two bits o' wreckage which we found point to 'er 'aving drifted that way. Only Gawd knows whether she's stopped in shaller water. The bettin's on 'er bein' within a cable o' that island. I'm not again' 'aving a shot there to-morrow's tide."

"You couldn't try to-day?" the doctor asked anxiously.

"Oh, lumme!" the captain cried indignantly, "a bloke can't go on for ever. Ain't I done my bit for one day, I asks you now?"

"Yes, yes, of course," the old man hastened to answer in mollifying tones; "but you understand how worried I am, I'm sure. I must be patient. Read to me a little, will you, Cleveland? . . . Dear me . . . I mustn't allow myself to be upset like this."

I read a little Meredith, and in half an hour he was quite recovered. I enjoyed these literary interludes. He would suddenly stop me and beg me to repeat a sentence, or perhaps a paragraph. Then he would go off into rhapsodies over its beauty, or perhaps with unerring skill pick out a weak point, criticise it and give an amazingly clever reconstruction. Once I expressed my surprise that he had made no venture in the field of fiction himself; and he told me pathetically that it had always been his ambition to write a novel, but that his life had been too crammed with other activities.

"Perhaps, my dear boy, the opportunity will come to me during the next few years. But I am ageing—I can't settle to things as I used to do. I worry too much. It's a terrible thing, is malaria. But I can't complain. I've had a wonderful life. Not easy, old boy. You've got to have sorrow if you're going to have happiness. I've had a lot of sorrow—not more than I deserved, though. And I've had happiness—perhaps more than I have deserved. It seems to me sometimes that I ask too much. These skulls—ah! If you only knew what they mean to me. I ask nothing

more of life. I wonder—yes, I often wonder if it's too much. Things are balanced, you know—wonderfully balanced . . .”

That, I gathered, was his philosophy of life—an unerring balancing up of things. You broke a law of Nature—and you paid for it. You sacrificed yourself for someone—and the reward came automatically. Suffering balanced happiness, work balanced rest, love balanced hate. It seemed to satisfy, yet I had always the feeling that in him the beam listed with an extra weight of sorrow, and I think now, having learned what I believe to be the most wonderful secret of life, that it was love that was wanting to sway the beam up against the pressing load. . . .

When lunch was over I handed Captain Timms his prescribed bottle of whisky. He accepted it with some embarrassment, and expressed the wish that I should come and join him and Trout in a quiet one, just to show that there was still no ill-feeling. But I preferred to sleep, and he went down towards the beach, whence a few moments later came the sound of a somewhat boisterous and cheerful meeting. Trout had evidently come ashore.

I lay down on my bed. I was still a little weak from my sun attack, and I quickly fell into peaceful unconsciousness.

It was three o'clock when I was awakened by Timms. To my surprise he did not seem in the least under the influence of alcohol. He looked worried, very worried indeed. He stood by my bedside, nervously tugging at his beard.

“Thought I'd better wake you,” he announced.

"Why?" I asked.

"Things 'as been 'appening," he announced mysteriously. "Queer things 'as been 'appening."

He would not sit down, and to my great surprise he suddenly poured himself out a glass of water and drank it—neat. I felt alarmed.

"Carry on—for God's sake," I cried.

"Well," he began, "I don't like to let my pals down—none of 'em. Me an' Trout is pals, we've been pals for a long time now. I don't like to let Trout down. At the same time I readily admits that you an' the ole man 'as acted very generous, particularly over this question o' liquor—I wants to do a fair deal all round."

He licked his lips nervously.

"Fact o' the matter is," he went on, "I've jst come by some information, an' after a very severe battle wiv meself, I've decided to 'and this information on. . . ."

He paced up and down awhile, then bit off a plug of tobacco and carried on.

"I tells you this for what it's worth. Don't go a-blamin' me if it's wrong." Another pause followed, then: "I meets 'Enry down on the beach when I leaves you. We 'as a drink or two, an' 'e, 'as is 'is nature, talks freely. 'E tells me that one of them niggers—not ours, but one of them belonging to the M. L., 'as 'eard that the wreck 'as been seen in shallow water wiv a bit o' mast sticking out—at Fish Island—the very place where I reckoned it would be found, an' that the box o' bones was taken out by some niggers what landed there, and left 'igh an' dry on the beach."

"Go on!" I cried excitedly.

"Well, 'Enry says the niggers told the tale to the skipper of the M.L., what speaks English, and he told it to the gel—or, to be more exact, 'e told the gel that the nigger knew where the wreck was, an' wanted a quid or two for the information. An' she gives it, an' asks 'Enry to go wiv 'er to the island at once. But 'Enry 'ad 'is appointment wiv me, an' 'e comes ashore in the dinghy——"

"Where is he now?" I shouted.

"'E's gone; 'e went wiv 'er an' the nigger nearly an hour ago."

I ran to the edge of the path. The launch was still at her moorings. Close to Fish Island, however, I could clearly make out the dinghy, moving in towards the beach.

Timms had followed me.

"I wouldn't get too excited about it," he said. "You know what these niggers are—they'll say anyfing for a bob."

I turned on him wrathfully.

"Damned generous of you, isn't it? Yarn or no yarn—if the skulls are there—oh! don't talk to me any more. I'm off—I don't want you. Help yourself to the whisky—take the whole damn lot."

"Now—now——" he began, but I did not heed him.

"Only don't tell the doctor—he's suffered enough already through your generosity."

I picked up the oars, ran to the beach, pushed off the boat and rowed out to the dhow. I didn't mince any words with Hamzar. The heftiest sailor

jumped in, seized the oars, and without waiting for further orders started to row—faster, I swear, than he had ever rowed before. I steered direct for the island, keeping just inside the reef to avoid the surf.

That negro knew I meant business—either that or he thought I had been bewitched by an evil spirit. The sweat poured from his naked body as he bent to the oars, and he panted and strained like a cart-horse climbing a hill. We had two miles to go, and my state of mind may be imagined. He did not utter a word of protest, although I raved and swore at him unceasingly. He avoided my eyes, and if by chance I suddenly stood up, he started as though I had raised a whip to strike him.

I kept a very anxious look-out for the dinghy. From the lagoon one could only see the top of the bush with which the island was clad. The beach was cut short by a mirage. By this time, of course, the party would have landed and begun their exploration.

Was the tale true? Was it just invention? Cunning though he is, I could hardly credit an East African native with the possession of so much subtlety. We had already argued that the wreck must have drifted in the direction of Fish Island. It was easily possible, even probable, that she had washed into shallow water, and that at low spring tide her upper structure would be exposed. Native fishermen cruising in that district might have boarded her, found the case and carried it on shore. One could imagine their horror when they opened

it and discovered the skulls inside. No sails would be fast enough to take them away from the dreadful spot.

Yes, the tale rang true, and I felt sick at heart when I thought how Miss Howard had beaten me, how Timms had played once more into her hands. It was a very slender hope that I clung to. The natives might not know the exact spot where the skulls had been left, and I might yet get there before the other party.

We had gone about half-way when I suddenly sighted the dinghy—ahead—but outside the reef. *She was moving back towards the launch.* I observed her anxiously, but ten minutes had passed before she was near enough for me to see that she contained only two persons—one of them easily recognisable as Trout, and the other a native, straining at the oars as strenuously as mine. *Miss Howard was not there.* I told the negro to look.

“Is there a woman there?” I asked.

“*Hapana*, Great Master?” he answered without hesitation. “Black man and big white master. No woman there.”

I shouted at him to redouble his efforts. The explanation of Miss Howard’s absence came only too easily to me. She had found the case, and she had sent Trout to bring the launch, so that she could get it shipped at once and sail before we had an inkling of what had happened. There could be no other explanation. We had lost.

“No, by Jove,” I muttered, “not yet.”

There was still time. We should land long before the dinghy reached the launch. That case would

never leave the island before Miss Howard's claim to it had been satisfactorily proved.

I was not going to stand by and see a poor old man be robbed. I would show Miss Howard that, for all her guile, I could be an honourable man. . . .

Cursing the negro for his slowness, I took the oars myself, and transformed my rage into energy. But I doubted whether we moved the faster. I was in very poor condition after my sickness, and my muscles protested with sharp twinges of pain. We changed again as we neared the shore. I steered straight on for a little bay, keeping a sharp lookout the while for Miss Howard. I decided that, on landing, I should take the native with me, and I explained to him that I was going to look for a big iron box, and that if he found it I would reward him. Judging from his expression, however, he looked as though the only thing he asked of life was to put a hundred miles between him and myself!

Fish Island is perfectly flat, and covered up to the edge of its low coral cliffs in bush. The bay we had now gained is the only indentation along its coast and, as you may see from the map, it is a quarter of a mile south-west of the place where I had found the derelict canoe. We ran in and beached a hundred yards from the extremity of Cape Meyer. The tide was flowing. We dragged the boat up to the high-water line, took the painter out and secured it to a piece of coral. Then we examined the sand for footprints.

It was quite apparent that the dinghy had landed

not very far away. The negro picked up what was obviously the trail of Trout and the native, and half a minute later he hailed the discovery of a female footprint, leading from the sand to a gap in the cliff where a rough path led westward through the bush, evidently to the shore at the opposite side of the cape.

"Follow the footprints," I cried to the native. He set off like a bloodhound, but we had scarcely reached the bush before he stopped and held up his hand. I brushed past him and found myself face to face with Miss Howard. She had been running. Her face was red with exertion, and the perspiration ran in streams down her neck. She looked tremendously excited.

"Oh," she stammered, "I—I—didn't expect to see you! I'm—oh, what a relief! Do you know what has happened? Did you pass them? They've left me. How—how have you come? Oh, I thought I'd go mad!"

"If you mean Trout and the native," I answered coolly, "I passed them half an hour ago, going full speed to the launch. But it won't be here for a long time yet. You'll probably think me a cad, but—well—you can guess why I'm here. I'm going to have a look at that case; and I'm going to stick by it until the doctor comes."

She gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Then you heard—they told you too? Who told you? Tell me."

"Does that really matter?" I asked. "You've been successful, but I'm not going to give up. If it was my own show, I wouldn't care a hang, but

I'm not going to let the doctor down again. . . . I'm sorry, but I've got to go on——"

"But—but—don't you see we've been fooled? Both of us. It isn't here. It's a lie. Trout persuaded me to come here; he went off without a word."

Her acting was splendid.

"I quite understand how you feel about it, Miss Howard," I said, "but I'm going on. This path leads somewhere, I suppose. *Kwenda*," I said to the native, "follow the footprints."

She stared at me in well-feigned amazement.

"But you don't think—you don't believe—oh—won't you see how we have been fooled? I tell you it's nothing but a tale. There's no wreck—no case. I've been right to the other side. Do believe me!"

"Will you come along with us, then?" I asked. "If Trout has marooned you, I can take you back. I've got to go and see. It's no question of believing. It's a question—well—of duty."

She looked angry now.

"Certainly I'll come with you," she answered with heat. "My word is evidently not good enough."

The negro set off, and we followed in silence. The path was overgrown, and progress was none too easy. But it was very direct, and before long we emerged on the beach again at the point where the western coast bends outwards to form the cape. There were no mangroves, and only a very narrow strip of sand between the sea and the cliff.

"Follow the woman's footprints," I said to the

native in Ki-Swahili. With his eyes to the ground he walked along the beach for ten yards, turned and came back to where we stood.

"They go back along to the path now," he said.

He traced them out for me, and I had no difficulty in interpreting their meaning. Miss Howard had walked along the sand, turned quickly and come back. There was no sign of her having stopped a second; certainly there was no sign of the box of skulls. I was puzzled. There had been no time for her to have made a protracted search of the beach. The negro would have discovered if she had diverged from the path.

I walked back to her.

"Well," she said, "are you satisfied?"

"Not exactly," I answered. "I should like to hear what happened—that is, if you're not too angry."

"Oh, I'm not angry a bit," she replied. "Our Arab captain said that one of his sailors had heard that the—er—wreck was here, and that the—er—case was buried in the sand. The diver offered to come with me. He has behaved quite decently—since that—time. I had to wait until he went ashore. I believe he has made some sort of understanding with Captain Timms, but perhaps you know more about that than I."

"Concerning whisky and work?" I said.

"Yes," she continued. "They want to commandeer all the whisky and just work when the mood is on them. We set off as soon as he returned."

"But why didn't your brother come?"

She flushed and answered with some hesitation.

"He isn't very well. We had the native with us," she continued quickly. "We landed at the bay over there. At the diver's suggestion I set off with the native. He said he would come when I called. We came here. The native pointed in the direction of the beach, and I walked on with him behind me. . . . But I hadn't gone far before he suddenly turned and ran as fast as he could for the path. I ran after him, but when I got to the beach the boat was almost out of hearing distance. I thought I would go along to the point to signal—there is a way this side—and then I heard your voice—that's all."

She looked at me in her frank way, and what doubt I had as to the truth of her story vanished. Yet I was more puzzled than ever.

What object could the native have in inventing such a yarn as this—in bringing us here on such a wild-goose chase? Why had Trout lent such a willing hand to it? Why?—but there was no end to the questions that cropped up in my mind, and certainly no answer to any of them.

"I think we had better get back," I said. "We can talk better when we're in the boat. It will be dark very soon."

She agreed, and we started off along the path in Indian file, Miss Howard first, the negro—as a precautionary measure—between us. I was taking no risks, and as we walked along I took note of a mark in his back where I would punch him if he made any attempt to emulate his fellow-countryman.

The bush on either side of the path grew tall, so

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that it obscured all view of the sea ; but the girl set a good pace, and we were not long in coming to the comparatively clear cliff edge.

The bay then was spread before us, and I brushed past the negro to Miss Howard's side.

And then I stopped, petrified with amazement.

The boat was gone !

CHAPTER XII

AN ISLAND NIGHTS' ENTERTAINMENT

THE negro gave a cry and pointed across Deep Strait.

"Bwana—I see—over there!"

I strained my eyes, and with difficulty discerned, through the haze that hung low over the water, the shape of our boat and the figure of a man at the oars, pulling evidently towards Thunder Island.

My apprehension increased.

"Is he black or white?" I asked.

The negro could not say, but he ran down to the beach to examine the sand where the boat had been left. We followed in silence.

"I think black man," was the negro's verdict. He pointed to the prints of naked feet impressed clearly on the sand at the water's edge. "He go very quick for other island."

That much was obvious, but it threw no light on the mystery, nor did it help to solve any of the perplexing problems crowding into my mind.

Was Miss Howard's story true? If Trout and the native had deliberately marooned her, what could their object be? Was there a connection between that incident and this? Had Timms told the truth? had Trout fooled him? Who

was the mysterious native, then? how had he got on to Fish Island? My brain staggered under this awful load. I turned to Miss Howard.

"You haven't got any explanation, have you?"

"Don't you think it's just part of the same plot," she answered. "I don't know why at all, but either the natives or the divers have conspired to get us both out of the way. Tell me how you came; who told you?"

"I heard indirectly," I replied carefully. "I heard that the case was here and that you had set off. How did you hear first?"

"Trout told me first," she replied. "He told me that the Arab skipper had something to say to me. But I can't see why Trout should do such a thing, can you?"

"I can't see anything at present," I said. "We've simply got to accommodate ourselves to facts, the most important being that we haven't a boat, that the island is a desert one, that we have neither food nor water, and that dark will fall in fifteen minutes. A pretty cheerful list!"

"It might be worse," she replied, "or at any rate from my point of view. Imagine what it would be like to be left alone. I was terrified. I—I'm afraid I'm very selfish," she added apologetically.

"You're not," I said. "I haven't thanked you yet for—for—" I bit my lip. I had no cause to thank her for last night's affair. If I was not careful, I should find myself involved in yet another problem.

"I only did what any other woman would have done," she put in. "And you were ridiculously angry. Are you quite well?"

"Physically, yes," I answered. "Mentally, I see signs of a breakdown any minute. Look here, we'll have to do something. Would you be afraid to wait here with the native while I have a try at the channel?"

"Don't be silly," she cried very decidedly. "You really are the most reckless man I have ever met. If the boat doesn't come, we'll simply have to stay here until the morning. There's nothing else to do, is there?"

Apparently there was not, yet simple though the proposition seemed, I think I would have welcomed the swim, even though the tide was high and my body dead tired. There were fewer complications in breasting a three-knot current than in spending the night on a desert island with a girl like this. I was afraid of her. Even now, when my mind was wrestling with a dozen problems of grave importance, I was aware that the old spell was ensnaring me. And it was not just a matter of physical things. I am no more proof against beauty than the average man—but beauty alone would not have caused me such unrest. There was something more—something vital, compelling and terribly dangerous.

"Don't you think we'd better make a signal?" she asked.

The question brought me to a more practical frame of mind. I felt in my pocket, and produced a box of matches, a cigarette case half full, and

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a penknife—the wherewithal for a fire, at any rate.

“Is there water here?” I asked the negro.

He thought there might be among the rocks at the cliff edge, but he did not offer to go and search. Possibly he was thinking about the Thunder Island spirits, and wondering whether their range was limited by the channel.

“This very bad place,” he said in a mournful voice, and sat down on his haunches.

“Get some wood,” I commanded.

“No good get wood,” he replied. “I stay here.”

I caused him to get up, and he stood shaking with fear while I spoke to him. But he would not move in the direction of the bush, and I realised that nothing would make him. A negro would face physical torture rather than take chances with the occult. His state becomes one of paralysis.

“It doesn’t matter,” Miss Howard cried cheerfully. “Let’s go and hunt for water and wood ourselves. It’s quite an adventure: a desert island and having to find things. You really ought to enjoy it. I wonder how many times you’ve dreamt you were Robinson Crusoe?”

“Dozens of times,” I said. “But remember old Robinson Crusoe had a ship to draw on for supplies, and his desert island was just about as desert as a well-irrigated allotment garden.”

I might have added that Robinson was wrecked alone, and that his problems did not include a lady. In my present state of mind I envied him.

However, we set off along the brow of the cliffs in the curve of the bay. Our first find was a tin canister that had evidently come from the launch, and drifted with the ebb-tide current. There were a few crumbs of biscuit inside, which I gallantly offered to my companion, and which she as gallantly refused.

"We might make a stew of them, if we find some water," she remarked gaily. "Couldn't we catch some fish, or limpets, or things?"

"We might," I replied without enthusiasm, "but I doubt it."

"What a cheerful person you are!" she cried. "Are you hungry? Men always are cross if they miss a meal . . . but of course you're very worried," she added.

"And aren't you?" I replied.

She laughed nervously.

"Terribly. So worried that I simply can't think; the whole business is too much for my feeble brain . . . but it must be worse for you?"

It was bad enough. We carried on in silence for a time. There was plenty of driftwood on the beach. Our first task certainly should be to make a fire as a signal to Timms. On Timms rested my only hope of assistance, and that was not a healthy one. I could not believe that he had knowingly taken a hand in the plot; but it had occurred to me that Trout had used him as a tool. Beyond that my reasoning at present would not carry me.

We collected the wood, therefore, but we found no sign of water. What pools had been made in

the rock hollows by the recent rain had long since dried.

Miss Howard suggested that we should remain on the sands, but I had only to draw her attention to the large crabs which had started to scamper about, to convince her that the cliff top would be less unpleasant, and it was to this that we carried our armfuls of wood and lit the fire. By this time it was quite dark.

The spot I had chosen was a few yards west of the gully where the path ascended, and it was tolerably clear of vegetation. By the firelight I improved it, and I cut two bundles of grass to relieve the hardness of the ground. Then, with a blazing branch for a torch, we went down to the beach again, to where the negro still sat petrified with fear.

"You are a fool," I said.

"Bwana, this place no good," he replied. "There be evil spirits." He shivered. Poor devil, I felt quite sorry for him. I persuaded him, however, to take the torch and collect sufficient driftwood to make himself a fire. But he would not venture within ten yards of the foot of the cliff. It was the bush that he feared, apparently.

That fire of his proved fortunate, for its fierce light attracted a shoal of sardine-like fry, which in their frenzy threw themselves up into shallow water and were left stranded by the retreating waves. I have known the same thing happen on the West Coast of Africa, but never quite so opportunely. I picked up a handkerchief-full in a couple of minutes, and then, leaving the negro

to his own resources, we went back to the camp.

I was feeling more cheerful at the thought of food, and Miss Howard laughed and chatted as gaily as if she were just setting out for a ball. What an amazing person she was! The average girl of my acquaintance would have gone into hysterics at the thought of being left alone on a desert island in the company of a comparatively strange man and a fear-palsied nigger. The other type, the modern woman who plays hockey until her ankles are thick, who wears frowsy clothes, smokes strong cigarettes, and generally disowns her sex, might not have been hysterical, but I doubt whether she would have viewed the situation with such sang-froid.

In spite of my distrust I could not help but be infected to a certain extent by her cheery optimism.

"How would you like them?" I said. "Grilled, fried, roasted, smoked, or stewed in salt water with biscuit crumbs?"

"I don't think the stew would be a success," she answered. "But you're a man of experience, Captain Cleveland; I leave it to you."

I remembered that once while hunting in East Africa, I had come across a native plantation near the edge of a river and found an old negress sitting in front of a fire roasting fish on little sticks. She had offered me one, and I found it excellent. The method seemed worth a trial now. I took about twenty of the fry, ran a long thin skewer through their eyes, and fixed them in front of a heap of

glowing embers. They soon began to frizzle in a most promising manner.

"Wonderful," Miss Howard cried, "wonderful. I do hope they won't be long. You see, I had no lunch. I was just starting when Trout told me about—about—the island. I was so dreadfully excited—I simply couldn't eat."

"What an extraordinary girl you are!" I said. "You don't seem a little bit put out by all that's happened."

"What's the use?" she replied, her expression showing just a hint of sadness. "I've had so much worry during the last—few years. Do you know, it's almost a relief to get away from it all—to realize that one is impotent, that there is nothing to decide—no responsibility to take. Don't you ever feel like that? You know we can't do anything now—that we've just got to wait and see. This is the most definite thing that has happened to me for ages. I suppose really I'm a fatalist. It's a useful way of looking at things. Now that we've lighted the fire there's nothing else to do."

"Yes," I agreed, "I envy you. Of course we are impotent. But then I have the added problem of—of——"

"Of me?" she interrupted with a laugh. "Such a dreadful problem, isn't it? Cast away on a desert island with an absolutely unscrupulous adventuress, one who will stick at nothing to drag your secrets from you—and——"

It was my turn to laugh. "I was not going to say that, but since you took the words out of my mouth, I will admit that you are a problem

to me, and that—well—some of your actions have——”

“Justified my modest description of myself? I think it's nicer to be frank.”

“It may be dangerous,” I said, turning the fish.

“But you think I am unscrupulous?” she challenged, catching my eyes.

I went very hot.

“To a certain point—yes. I think if you had to do a very small bad thing to achieve a very good big thing, you'd do it, and—well—I don't blame you.”

“In other words, you do so yourself?” she questioned mockingly.

“I'd do a very big bad thing and not worry about the good at all,” I answered. “I think the fish are ready.”

I was glad they were. The conversation was becoming a little too frank. I was confoundedly hungry too.

“Are you very thirsty?” I inquired.

“Not a bit,” she answered. “But I'm afraid you must be. Really you shouldn't have stirred from your tent to-day after your illness. Now don't give me all the fish . . . the ration for one unscrupulous adventuress is eight, and one terribly reckless man who does big bad things without worrying—is twelve. Oh, I say! They are nice! Wonderful man.”

They were not at all bad, and they were small enough to make the picking of bones unnecessary.

"The most exquisite food I have ever tasted," Miss Howard cried, when we had finished.

She took a cigarette from my case, placed it between her full red lips, and as I put a burning wand to the end of it, inhaled luxuriantly. I had never seen her so beautiful as then. The firelight was dancing in her eyes and on her hair, and it gave a rich colourful glow to her sun-browned cheeks. She breathed the blue smoke out again, and then suddenly smiled, catching my eyes and holding them in a bewildering stare which sapped from my mind every thought and left but a gnawing hunger.

And I knew then that I loved her, that I wanted her more than anything else in life. Every wish, every doubt, every scruple, every thought was subjugated to that one elemental thing. The cavern of orange light the fire carved out of the darkness became a pagan temple, incense scented and jewel decked, and in the chancel sat a goddess—symbol of heaven, demanding adoration and the sacrifice of all that was mine to give and pay.

My limbs trembled, my heart throbbed so that it choked me, I could not speak, all self-control was gone; and I was aware that my eyes had become uncurtained windows through which flooded unchecked the flaming of my love.

Oh, what a fool I was! I believed at that moment I saw love in her eyes too, that she desired me as I desired her. I reached out my hands towards her, mumbling incoherently. She gave a sudden start,

her eyes fell, and then looked up again—cold with fear and distrust. But only for a fleeting second was that emotion palpable—one fleeting second in which I crashed from heaven to earth. Then with a laugh she plucked a glowing stick from the fire and held it out to the cigarette which still remained between my lips.

I inhaled mechanically and leaned back. The spell was broken, and I was aware that a barrier like the walls of ice that guard the Poles had come between us.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

It was a defiant challenge—nay, a command—that I should lie.

"Affairs in general," I replied.

"Have you solved any of your problems?"

I shook my head.

"I don't see reason anywhere. The whole thing is like a dream. But the thing that still perplexes me most is the disappearance of our boat. Trout could not possibly have returned here. The man must have been on the island all the time."

I stood up, and shading my eyes from the fire gazed across the channel to Thunder Island. The haze into which the boat had disappeared had lifted, and the dark mass of Sudi Hill stood out clear against the starshine. Lighthouse Hill was less easily discernible, and I could see no light either at the camp or where I reckoned the dhow and launch to be. It was a forbidding prospect, to which our negro, huddled over his waning fire on the beach, lent an uncanny eeriness.

"Do you see anything?" Miss Howard cried.

I turned towards her with a sensation almost of relief. "Nothing," I said. "But I've half solved one problem."

The sight of the dark strait of water had brought back the memory of my last adventure on Fish Island, and the finding of the canoe. I sat down and told her the story. She listened with eagerness.

"The canoe, instead of being derelict, had probably been left there while the native went off—perhaps in search of water. Unconsciously I marooned him, and the poor devil's been here ever since. No wonder he was glad to get away—that he didn't wait for us."

Such was my conclusion, and my explanation of the incident that had brought in its train such misfortunes. I chuckled to myself ironically. If it hadn't been for that confounded mischance, I might now be with Timms and Doctor Flint—safe in camp—safe from the torturing knowledge that love had come to me. For torment it was. To sit so near her, to look into her eyes, to listen to her voice, to know that I loved her, and to be aware of the insurmountable barrier rising between us, was torment to which there could be no equal.

Whether Miss Howard was aware of my state of mind, I could not say, but her gaiety had gone and in its place I felt a kindness which, if it was not expressed in words, brought a sort of easing of my pain. I built up the fire again, and then we talked of many things—books—plays we had seen, England

—my bid for the Cairo to Cape Town air race. She told me of her war experience in France and Egypt, and we discovered more mutual friends. She had a delightful sense of humour, a shrewd philosophy, and a general outlook on life which, where men were concerned, showed just a suspicion of cynicism; and in all I recognised that quality of unbending pride, so characteristic of her class, so commonly mistaken for snobbery.

We had talked for an hour maybe when a chance remark about Doctor Flint brought us back to realities.

"I've given up thinking about our immediate problem," I said. "But I'm still fearfully curious about your own expedition. I don't want to pry into your affairs—yet——"

She laughed at my embarrassment.

"What puzzles you in particular?"

"Well, your interest in marine zoology, or to be more accurate, perhaps, anthropology."

"But I don't understand," she replied.

"Then what is the object of your expedition?"

She looked puzzled.

"Surely the same as your own."

"But you're not an anthropologist, are you? You—are not——" I hesitated.

"I don't understand a little bit. Doctor Flint—all of us are searching for a wreck—for—for—but you know, don't you? I am not asking you to break any promise of secrecy?"

"Certainly not," I said. "I'll admit that we are looking for a sunken dhow. But even then,

seeing what it is supposed to contain, I don't quite see why——"

"Why I should be as anxious as Doctor Flint to secure the treasure?"

"Treasure!" I cried in amazement. "But surely you don't think there is treasure in the dhow?"

"Then it is evident that you don't," she answered coolly. "I am afraid Doctor Flint has misled you. There is treasure. Honestly, do you think an old blind man would risk so much if there were not something big at stake?"

"But there is something big, Miss Howard, to him. I am bound in honour not to divulge it. But . . . it is not treasure."

She paused, and then continued calmly:

"Well, Captain Cleveland, I'll try and convince you that I am right, and that Doctor Flint has misled you.

"Possibly Doctor Flint has already told you that my late uncle, Professor Sladen, and he were together in an expedition to Central Africa, just before the war. I expect you will also know about the old ruins they found. I only learnt that a month or so ago when my uncle—who was just such another character as Doctor Flint—was taken very ill. I have told you that I was a nurse. He lived near Harrogate, in the manor house of a village called Westburton, a very out-of-the-way place. It was his housekeeper who wired for me, and I caught the first train from town and arrived to find him dying. He was quite sane and he started to tell me about the expedition. He described the finding

of the ruins—then the discovery of the royal catacombs and—of a treasure which must have belonged to the Egyptian Kings. It consisted chiefly of precious stones—of fabulous value, my uncle said.” She paused.

I made no comment.

“I have not the slightest doubt,” she continued almost defiantly, “that the treasure is absolutely genuine.

“Then he spoke of a quarrel with Doctor Flint, and the appearance of an Egyptian called Dusi Khan, then of the terrible journey to the coast, of the sinking of the ship with treasure aboard, and of his escape to Zanzibar. He was weakening all the time, however, and as soon as he began to describe Thunder Island he became unconscious. Thunder Island . . . Doctor Flint . . . were his last words. Under his will I was made sole heiress, so you see if anyone has a right to the treasure, I have, haven’t I?”

I was so bewildered at this amazing version of Doctor Flint’s own story, that I found myself incapable of giving any reasonable answer. The forty skulls a myth—a deliberate invention for my especial benefit—the Doctor’s story a well-told lie,—his rapturous talk of the scientific honour they were to bring him an even better acted one? It was unbelievable! Why, even in his illness he had raved about the skulls, the word ‘treasure’ had never passed his lips, except when he spoke of Sladen’s niece and Dusi Khan. No; my trust in Doctor Flint and his story remained—absolute. Yet how could I possibly persuade Miss Howard of

the hopelessness of her quest and yet keep faith with my employer ?

" You went to Doctor Flint, didn't you ? " I asked after a long, embarrassing silence.

" Yes," she replied. " That's where I saw you first. I thought—it was silly of me, of course—that being physically helpless he would be glad to give me the exact whereabouts of the dhow, and share the treasure if I found it. He told me as much as you have told me."

" Which is . . . nothing," I said. " I'm afraid—horribly afraid—that there is no treasure. Your uncle's mind must have been unhinged, in spite of his apparent sanity. It is impossible for me to believe that Doctor Flint has invented the story he has told me. He has been so consistent . . . even in his illness."

" But do you think the Egyptian is also mad ? " she asked tremulously.

" I don't know—I don't know, I'm hanged if I do. The whole thing seems—I wish I could tell you—what I know. I'm sure you'd be convinced."

" Oh, oh, please . . . don't. If you knew what it meant to me . . . the treasure. I must—I *must* believe in it. I couldn't face going back to . . . Oh ! " She broke down, but quickly recovered, and a hard battling look came into her eyes.

" Forgive me, I shouldn't have told you. Shall—shall we talk about something else ? "

" I think you'd better lie down," I said gently. " You must be dead tired."

In spite of her protests, I lifted my heap of grass over to her side of the fire, and spread it out to form a fairly comfortable mattress. Then I walked along the cliff edge to cut some more.

I worked mechanically, for my mind was full of what she had just said to me, and I strove hard to find some reasonable view-point from which to survey the present situation. I felt like that man in *The Wrong Box*, who was the victim of so many plots and counter-plots that he had to sit down and make out a balance-sheet of them. The task seemed hopeless. Yet in the end, from all that chaos of thought, there emerged two certain supreme facts : *I was in love with Patricia—and Patricia was not in love with me.*

For the rest it did not matter very much whether Doctor Flint was a rogue or not, whether the case contained skulls or Koh-i-noors, whether we should ever see dhow, launch or camp again. Love apparently is the great simplifier.

I found, on my return, that she was asleep, or pretending to be. Her hair was down in two long plaits that curved across her shoulders and fell almost to her waist. Her face was turned away from the fire. Quietly I prepared my bed, and then after I had taken a last survey of the sea, and made sure no boat was approaching, I lay down. But sleep would not come. I watched the fire droop to a heap of smouldering ashes. I watched the stars mount one by one to their zenith and recede, and saw the first flush of day suffuse the eastern horizon.

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Then I rose and looked over the cliff edge to the beach. A boat, which even in the gloom I could recognise as our own, was just running in to the sands.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CAPTAIN EXPLAINS

I GAVE a shout to Miss Howard and ran down the gully to the sands. And there, just getting out of the boat, was Timms. I hailed him.

"Thank Gawd!" he cried thickly. "Thank Gawd! Are you all right, lad? 'Ave a drink; I've brought a drop o' coffee."

Day was breaking and there was sufficient light for me to see that his face was haggard, his eyes bloodshot, and that his general condition was that of a man who has passed an unkindly night.

"Miss Howard's here too," I said.

"Aye, aye, I know; it's a bad business all round, and—and I'm to blame for everything—blarsted idjut that I be. I'll tell you everyfing in time. I'm not a-goin' to spare meself. But there's food an' drink for you both. Where's the lady?—she ain't ill?"

At that moment Miss Howard appeared from the gully, and she quickly joined us. Timms implored us to partake of the food he had brought—biscuits, tongue, and a tin of pears. But the coffee—steaming hot from a thermos flask—was all we wanted. The negro, still shaking, accepted the biscuits with gratitude.

"I'll talk to you when we're under way," said Timms.

I ran back to the camp for my topee, and then we pushed off, the negro at the oars, Miss Howard and I in the after seat, and the captain squatting on the stern sheet before us. I had never seen him looking so utterly miserable. All his bravado had gone; he talked like a repentant child.

"It's a bad business all round," he began, "an' I tells you what I'm goin' to tell you, not because I wants to excuse meself, but because I thinks you ought to know, you two bein' the people mostly affected by what you'll rightly call my foolishness.

"I makes no excuse whatever; but if you wants one word to explain everything, it's—whisky. . . . You'll recollect, young man"—he did not look at me, but kept his eyes fixed on the bottom of the boat—"You'll recollect a certain proposition I put before you an' the ole man yesterday forenoon, on behalf of me an' that bloke Trout, whereby we was to 'ave an arrangement about liquor an' business in general."

I intimated that this incident was still fresh in my memory, and Miss Howard mentioned that the proposition likewise had been put to her by Trout.

"You'll recollect also that while I was a-cookin' of breakfast you comes to me an' 'as a talk, an'—don't think that I blames you—that you gives me a drink an' makes a suggestion that was contrariwise to what I had already put to you. We was to carry on diving, both me an' 'Enry, an' that I was to 'ave a freer 'and wiv the whisky. An' to that I agreed. . . ."

I nodded.

"Well, after we'd 'ad breakfast, I goes down to

'Enry an' tells 'im what 'ad 'appened. Beggin' yer pardon, Miss, Trout raised 'ell. 'E said as 'ow I 'ad betrayed a sacred trust—that I'd let 'im down an' done things that was a discredit to my perfession. I consoles 'im wiv a drink, an'—I 'ad one or two meself, the supply bein' generous. We talks things over, but Trout wouldn't bend a inch. 'E was just clean balmy wiv what 'e called righteous anger. Now I didn't want to let Trout down, neither did I want to let no one down, but somehow or other we gets discussin' an idea for—well, for gettin' 'old o' that whisky an' o' that liquor which 'Enry believed was in the M.L. I know you told 'im that you'd thrown it overboard, lady, but 'Enry always was of a suspicious nature. The idea that was discussed—was 'ow to get—both o' you out o' the way for a few hours."

"So you invented that very ingenious tale about the wreck?" I asked.

He mopped his brow and licked his lips like a dog that was about to be thrashed.

"Aye, that was it," he continued. "I don't want to spare meself; I take the blame for everything, for that—that—idjut 'Enry ain't responsible. We agrees to carry on until noon. Then 'Enry was to get round the skipper of the M.L. for a few bob an' get 'im to put it up to you, Miss. An' that's what 'appened. When I saw you well away, I was to do my share. I thinks in my foolishness that it might be a good thing all round, an' make things more peaceful like between the two camps, if the young man was to come along an' kind o' rescue you——"

Miss Howard laughed nervously.

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"Captain Timms is romantic," I said, biting my lip.

"I didn't mean no 'arm by that," he went on. "I thought I was goin' to make a little good out of what I knew was goin' to be a bad job."

I wonder if he guessed to what extent he had been successful.

"Believe me or not, my 'eart wasn't in it, particularly after we 'ad finished diving—an'—er——"

"The effects of the whisky had worn off——"

"Aye, I saw things clearer then. But I'd a-given my word to a pal. So I says to meself, 'You'll carry on, Timms; but you'll stand by to see that when the young people is out of the way, there'll be a fair deal wiv the whisky' . . . I reckoned that we'd share it out equal between all the men o' the party, including the ole man, yourself, an' the other gentleman on the M.L."

"Oh!" Miss Howard cried out with obvious anxiety. "Did—did——" She suppressed herself and turned her face away, then in a calmer voice: "Is Mr. Howard well?"

"'E's all right," Timms answered. "As far as I know, I ain't seen 'im since last night—when—'e went back to the M.L."

"Oh, carry on," I cried impatiently, pretending that I was not aware of Miss Howard's embarrassment about her brother. I had already guessed the exact nature of his illness. "You saw the dinghy push off for the island, then you told me your pretty tale, and, full of remorse, watched me embark. What then?"

"I sees 'Enry go alongside the launch," he replied;

"but in about ten minutes I sees 'im push off for the shore along wiv the other gentleman——" He paused again, for Miss Howard seemed dreadfully upset. I suggested to her that we should hear the story later, but she insisted that he should go on.

"It can't be worse—than—I know——" she said.

"They comes ashore," he continued. "'Enry goes for me straight away for telling you too soon. 'E says you'd be back again afore we'd 'ad time to get things squared up. Well, I gets angry—I told 'im I was a-goin' to break wiv the ole show. We argues an' argues, an' then 'e agrees that if I gets a case from the ole man's tent we'll call it square all round."

"And you did?"

"Aye. The ole man was still asleep. I gets the case an' we 'as a few drinks all round. Then the gentleman says that 'e'd better be gettin' back. 'E goes off in the dinghy wiv the nigger, an' leaves us. It was gettin' dark by then an' I begins to get worried about what 'ad 'appened to you. You 'were overdue by an hour. 'Enry says that things were goin' favourable—better'n 'e expected."

"Naturally," I put in.

"'E begins to get quarrelsome an' 'e began arguing that we should take the chance an' get 'old of the rest o' the liquor. I objected, an' 'e started to go up the parth by 'imself. The ole man 'ad been a-calling of me for some time, an' I knew that there'd be trouble. I pulled 'im back, an' 'e lets fly, catching me in the stummick. I don't know what 'appened then exactly—for we 'ad a general mix up—an' when I sort o' came to me ordinary

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senses, 'Enry was lying on the ground, down an' out. I sprinkled water on 'is face, but it was no good. I must 'ave caught 'im in a particular spot. . . . "

For the first time the captain showed signs of his old cheerfulness, but it quickly faded.

" The ole man, up on top, was making an awful fuss. I went up to 'im an' told 'im straight what 'ad 'appened. Gawd ! 'Ow 'e cursed me ! 'E told me I must go off straight away an' see if you 'ad landed anywhere—told me to find the parth that goes along to the north end of the island, the same as you took the other day, an' get as far on as I could.

" Well, I takes the flash light an' goes down an' 'as a look at 'Enry. 'E was still out, but breathin', so I left 'im an' climbed up to the top o' the 'ill where them ruins are. An' then I sees the lights on the island. I ought to 'ave gone back then, but I thinks, well, I'll try an' get to the point an' signal to you. I finds the parth an' sets off, an' I gets just this side of that swamp, when that—that lamp went out. . . . "

By this time we had reached the beginning of the lagoon, and I took a bee-line for the launch, seawards of the reef.

" I hadn't got no matches," he continued, " so I turned back an' must 'ave struck another parth—'coz before long I finds meself in the middle o' that swamp a-flounderin' about like a blinkin' 'ipperpotamus."

We both laughed in spite of ourselves. The simile was delicious.

"An' I carries on like that for the best part of the night. It was 'ardly an hour ago when I comes out of it on the beach—this side o' the swamp—just about beat to the wide. I looks toward the little island there to see if I could catch sight o' the lights I 'ad seen before, but I sees nothing. I walks on a bit, 'opin' to find a parth leadin' inwards, an' then I claps eyes on this 'ere boat, just afloat at the water's edge. Thinks I to myself, 'They've landed 'ere by mistake an' got lost same as me.' I gives a 'oller, but 'ears nothing. I jumps into the boat again then, thinking I'd pull back to the camp, when I sees the light again. It must 'ave been the nigger's fire I saw. Anyway, I thinks there must be someone on the island, an' I pulls as fast as I could. . . ." He paused. . . . "That's my story," he added sorrowfully. "I asks for no forgiveness. I've been a fool—an idjut ; but, as I says before, if you wants one word to explain everyfing, it's—whisky."

He wiped his brow again and nervously bit off a quid of tobacco.

"It was a pretty dirty trick," I said. "Apart from the marooning—which was not altogether your fault—I'll be hanged if I can understand your lending a hand to such a heartless business. You don't imagine we're hunting that wreck for pure pleasure, do you? It means a mighty lot to all of us. Miss Howard expected——"

"Oh, please don't worry about it," she interrupted. "I'm sure Captain Timms didn't mean to do that. It was cruel, but—well, it's finished now. We can't help what has happened. Are you going straight

to the launch? Perhaps we can talk about it later."

It wrung my heart to see how unhappy she was. To be madly in love with a girl, to see her suffer, and to be absolutely impotent to help her in any way, is a terrible strain for a man to bear. And God knows what agony she was going through then. No matter how bravely she insisted on the existence of that treasure, my denial must have carried conviction, and the knowledge that her brother had actually participated in this desperate plot to commandeer the whisky—and from Timms' narrative it was clear that he had—was by itself sufficient to break her proud spirit. Dear God, how I longed to take her in my arms, and let her weep her heart out on my breast.

There was no sign of Howard on the deck of the launch, but from one of the native sailors I ascertained that he was down below and that the diver was still on the island. Patricia went aboard, and without a word disappeared down the cabin hatch. We turned for the shore.

"Where did you leave Trout?" I asked the captain.

"At the bottom of the parth," he said.

Controlling my anger with a tremendous effort, I explained to him how the boat had disappeared the previous night, and gave him what I thought was the explanation. But he could not recollect seeing or hearing any sign of human presence near the spot where he had found it. It was clear, however, that the native, unless he had died of exhaustion, was still at large on Thunder Island.

" 'E'll turn up soon if he's 'ungry an' thirsty," said Timms. " Wouldn't surprise me if 'e's at the camp this minute."

We made the remainder of the journey to the dhow in silence. The negro was put aboard, and then we ran in to the shore.

There was no sign of Trout on the beach, but a collection of bottles and a broken packing case marked the scene of last night's revelry. We pulled the boat well up, took out the oars and climbed to the camp. I went straight to the doctor's tent, and it was with no little relief that I found him lying safely in bed.

" Oh, my dear boy," he cried with genuine affection, " I'm glad to see you safe. I have been so anxious. Sit down. What has happened? Timms—ah, I hear him. The scoundrel. . . . I'll have him clapped into gaol for this. Piracy, pure piracy it is."

I gave the doctor a brief account of what had happened.

He raged when I had finished.

" Why didn't you tell me, old boy? The scoundrels—the whole lot of 'em—and that woman is the worst of them all. She's behind it; I'll wager she's behind it."

" No, sir," I protested. " She's suffered more than—well, considerably more than I have. I'm sure you are mistaken about her character."

" Rubbish!" he cried. " She's an adventuress. She'd tell you anything."

" She's nothing of the sort, sir," I replied with some heat. " She's Sladen's heiress, and she believes

she has a perfect right to—to—what is in that wreck. I know what my duty is, sir—and nothing will interfere with my carrying it out to the best of my ability, but—I'm not going to believe she is what you say."

"She's got you ; I knew she'd get you," he cried hoarsely. "You gave me your word ; I trusted you."

"And I have not betrayed that trust," I retorted angrily. "And while we are discussing it, sir, I would like to have a clearer understanding of the whole business."

My anger surprised him.

"Yes, yes," he said more calmly. "We must not lose our tempers, old fellow. What do you want to say ? Forgive me, I'm not very well—you know——"

He lay back on his bed panting with exertion. My rage cooled, yet I was determined not to lose the opportunity of clearing my mind on a very important point.

"It's this, sir," I said. "You will recollect that my contract is to help you find a collection of anthropological specimens. I'm going to be quite frank. I understand that neither Miss Howard—nor Dusi Khan for the matter of that—is looking for a case of skulls, but—but for—treasure."

He laughed.

"My dear boy—of course, of course. I've told you that Dusi Khan accused us of treasure hunting. I told you that he probably thought that we had found and taken a treasure with us. Treasure"—he laughed again—"of course the case contains

treasure—an incredible treasure for a scientist like myself.”

“But why should Miss Howard think that, sir?” I asked.

“Sladen was mad when he died; his mind was unhinged. He would babble. His mind would be full of the thing. Oh, what a rogue he was! what a damnable scoundrel!”

If I ever had any doubts about the forty skulls, they were dispelled now. Yet, convinced though I was, I determined this time to be doubly sure.

“But supposing there was treasure in the wreck, after all,” I said, “would you be willing to share it—with Miss Howard?”

“Of course,” he answered, without a moment’s hesitation. “All of it—every scrap of it, old fellow.” He laughed. “What fools they all are!”

It was enough. I knew now that Patricia’s hopes were doomed—that even if she did find the wreck first, and solve the case, her reward would be nothing but a heap of ancient skulls.

“I’m sorry if I got angry,” Flint said kindly. “But you know how irritable I am. I hate all women—and all women are alike to me. I forget that you are young. Don’t worry any more. Do you think the captain will be too tired to go down to-day? Ask him, will you? Try to persuade him.”

I joined Timms at the fire.

“Is the ole man all right?” he whispered.

“Quite,” I said. “And full of love for you. Any signs of your friend?”

He shook his head.

"The bloke's vanished. I swear I left 'im down on the beach there. 'E's a rum 'un. I'll go an' 'ave a look for 'im. Maybe 'e's strayed along the beach."

"After breakfast," I said. "I'm too hungry to care whether he's dead or alive. Do get a move on."

I walked towards the hut to change my clothes, but I was arrested half way by the sight of Howard, coming over the top of the path. He was bathed in perspiration, his eyes were puffed and bloodshot, and he looked indescribably dirty and unpleasant.

"Hello!" he panted, "I say—you'll pardon me, won't you, old thing—er—Cleveland. May I speak to you?"

"Yes—of course," I said. "Come into the shade. You look—er—quite ill."

He came in and took the bottom of my bed for a seat. I offered him a glass of water.

"Phew! What an awful place this is, isn't it? Positively dreadful. Like making a fellow go mad. You—you—haven't got—er—any——"

He looked desperately at the water.

"Sorry," I said.

"Damn silly of me, I know, to want it—but—a fellow must take something. . . ."

"There'll be some tea in a moment. What's the trouble?"

He coughed, and contrived to look even a little more foolish.

"I—I—a flag of truce, dontcherknow. Look here, old thing—it's no earthly use trying to get this beastly treasure—unless—perhaps I'd better

mention that my—er—Miss Howard—is in no way associated with this—entirely my own idea.”

I congratulated him.

“Look here, old thing,” he continued. “Why can’t we come to some agreement or other? My sister, you know, is an awfully decent sort; and between you and me, she’s running the commander of the ship idea a little too far. Really, it’s becoming perfectly dreadful. I’m awfully fond of her, and all that, you know, but I——”

“What is it you want?” I interrupted impatiently. My foot was itching to kick him.

Perhaps he sensed my state of mind, for he got up.

“You’re not offended, are you?”

“Not at all,” I said. “What is it you want?”

“Nothing—nothing—really,” he stammered, “I just thought—you know we might—er—sort of join up, and share that treasure stuff when we found it. I’m getting pretty sick of living on that ship—no company—and what not—my sister’s taking up such an extraordinary attitude about drink too. I’ve got to hide the stuff and I haven’t a drop of whisky left. You might think almost that she was the man—and—and——”

“Not you?” I put in. “I think that you had better return to your sister—pretty quickly.” I gave him his hat. “I’m sorry I cannot consider your suggestion favourably, but I am quick to appreciate the splendid altruism behind it. You rowed in by yourself? Fine. If I were you, I’d take a row round Thunder Island, it would do you good.”

He made no answer, but walked unsteadily to the top of the path, when he came to a sudden stop.

"Good God!" I heard him cry. "I say—I say—look!"

I rushed forward and looked.

The launch's dinghy, with our own boat in tow, was well on its way to the dhow. In it were Trout and Dusi Khan.

CHAPTER XIV

DUSI KHAN

THE explanation came to me like a flash of light. It was Dusi Khan whom I had unwittingly marooned on Fish Island. It was Dusi Khan who had marooned us last night. He had got there probably from another dhow which had sailed from Zanzibar after we did. He must have met Trout on the beach this morning. Like attracts like. They had joined forces. . . .

I rushed back to the hut, shouting to Timms. My rifle! I had left it in the corner behind my bed.

"What's up?" cried Timms, coming in.

"The Egyptian—Trout—where's my rifle?"

We searched for it frantically, turning out every stick of furniture and kit. I ran to the doctor's tent.

"What's the matter? Tell me, old fellow," he cried excitedly.

"Dusi Khan—do you know where the rifle is?"

He didn't. In despair I picked up his pistol, and rejoined Timms.

The boats had almost reached the dhow.

"Gawd!" cried Timms. "Thought I heard a rum sort of noise just now—thought the gentleman must 'ave brought a nigger ashore with 'im an' 'e

was smashin' up the whisky case for firewood. What's the game? "

" Damn you, can't you see? " I cried, exasperated. " Let's get back, the rifle's our only hope."

We went back, but we didn't find the rifle, nor any of its ammunition. It had been stolen—my pistol also. The only two weapons in the camp were the doctor's pistol and my shot-gun, both equally useless at the present range. Doctor Flint tottered out of his tent, imploring an explanation. But I had no time to give it. I ran to the cliff edge. They had reached the dhow, and with my glasses I could clearly distinguish Dusi Khan, talking to Hamzar, the Arab skipper. The latter was bowing and salaaming, and the crew stood around with their heads bowed.

I ground my teeth at the thought that with the rifle I could have shot him with the greatest ease. It wouldn't have worried me very much if I had killed him. The law seemed a long way off.

A minute or two later Dusi Khan rejoined Trout in the dinghy, and they set off in the direction of the launch.

Good God! Miss Howard—she was alone! She would be absolutely at their mercy.

I turned to Howard, who was standing beside me with a vacuous grin on his sheep-like face.

" I say, this is a joke, isn't it! " he said.

" Joke, my God! " I blazed. " Don't you understand what's happened? Don't—oh, hell! I could kill you. . . . Where was your sister when you left? "

" I say—I say," he stammered. " She went down

below, you know—awfully tired—and she—she—I say! There's no danger, is there? Who is this Dusi Khan chap?"

My heart went cold. I searched the deck of the launch with my glasses. Only two natives were discernible. The chances were a thousand to one that she was asleep. The full significance of the situation came upon me. The crews of both dhow and launch were probably in the Egyptian's power. It was no idle tale that the doctor had told me about his influence. Hamzar had regarded him with obvious awe, and he might have been a god by the way the rest of the crew stood round with their heads bowed.

But more dreadful than this was the knowledge that Miss Howard would be at his mercy. I knew his breed too well—a hundred generations of Western civilization would not temper the brute sensuality marked by the evil handsome face, the thick dull lips and languorous eyes of the Oriental male.

For a moment my anger overcame me.

"You despicable coward, to leave a girl alone like that. Have you no manliness in you? No sense of decency at all? Don't you realise that, in spite of her courage, she's a girl, demanding a man's protection? Ugh! you make me sick—you—you——"

"Don't, don't," he implored, real tears mixing with the beads of sweat that coursed from his brow.
"Really—really——"

-- I walked away from him. He made me feel murderous. The dinghy had reached the launch. I could hardly hold the glasses steady enough to

watch what was happening. I saw them both go on board, however, without any apparent opposition, and disappear into the cabin. Ten minutes later Dusi Khan came on deck—spoke to one of the natives and went below again. The native got into the boat and started rowing towards the dhow.

“What’s the game, d’you think?” asked Timms in a very subdued voice.

“Expect they’ll tow the dhow out,” I answered.

I was right. A few minutes later the dhow’s anchor was weighed, and with a couple of negroes in the dinghy, fastened to her bows, she began to move seawards to the channel.

“It’s all up,” I said. “They’ve commandeered the whole outfit.”

“What about the girl?” he asked with emotion. “By Gawd! if they touches a ’air of ’er ’ead, I’ll—I’ll——”

Once more I lost control of myself, and I went for Timms without mercy.

When I had cooled down a little, he said very quietly:

“I knows it’s all my fault. But that ain’t a-goin’ to ’elp matters. It strikes me that ’Enry is goin’ to ’elp that blinkin’ dago to dive for the wreck. I knows ’Enry—any master’s good enough for ’im if the pay an’ the liquor’s all right. But is the liquor all right? ’Ow much liquor is there on board that boat? None—an’ what the gel says is right. If I know anythin’ ’Enry will soon develop a longin’ for the shore. I’ll lay he’s smellin’ them cases of whisky already. Let ’im come ashore an’——”

“Yes,” I said. “But don’t you see there may

be divers among the niggers there? That Egyptian won't run any risks. But I'm not worrying about the wreck—it's Miss Howard. We've got to rescue her."

"Cleveland! Cleveland!"

There was a terrible plaintiveness in the doctor's voice.

"Keep a look-out," I said to Timms, and then ran to the tent.

Doctor Flint was sitting on the bed, looking dreadfully ill. As hopefully as possible, I told him what had taken place. A look of blank despair came over his face, the muscles of his mouth began to twitch, and then his head fell back upon his pillow and he sobbed as though his heart was broken. A minutes later he lapsed into a state of unconsciousness.

I gave a shout for Howard.

"Look here," I said. "Doctor Flint is very ill; we shall have to get him back to Zanzibar as quickly as we can. You realise how matters stand? That Egyptian is after the wreck; he's about as big a scoundrel as you'll meet anywhere. I—I—as things stand, it looks as though he were top dog all round. But I'm not giving up hope of beating him. We've got to join forces—really—this time. I shall want you to help me with the doctor. He must not be left a moment."

For the first time I saw a gleam of genuine intelligence come into his face.

"Rather," he said. "Awfully keen on helping. Do anything you like. I say—do forgive me—I'm an awful rotter, you know."

"It's a splendid chance to prove you're not," I said. "Know anything about nursing?"

"Rum thing, isn't it?" he answered. "Used to be quite an expert. As a matter of fact I did a year's medical at Guy's—got chucked out for a rag—was awfully keen as a matter of fact—awfully fed up. Don't know much, you know. What's wrong—collapse?"

"Malaria—worry—and general weakness, by the look of it. You help me to make him comfortable, sponge him—that's all we can do."

To my amazement he went about the business as to the manner born. Together we lifted the doctor to the ground. Then very swiftly he made the bed; we lifted him back, and he as skilfully set about the sponging business.

"Leave it to me," he said. "I know exactly what to do. Quite enjoy doing things like this—used to be frightfully keen."

I was beginning to see an entirely new side to his character. The gods apparently designed him to be a girl, and lost their plans before the job was done. It explained many things.

"Give me a shout if he shows any sign of becoming worse," I said. "He's been like that before, and he came round all right. We can do nothing but wait."

I went back to Timms.

The dhow had reached the mouth of the channel, and had dropped anchor again. He had seen no sign of Patricia, but he had watched Trout talking to Dusi Khan, and evidently explaining the diving pump fixed on the launch's deck.

"I'll lay a quid to nothing 'Enry will be diving. They may 'ave native divers, but no one but a fool would trust to them when a proper gear an' a proper man's available. Look—by Gawd—the M.L.'s movin' in."

We watched anxiously. Very slowly she got under way—turned south and moved to a position a hundred yards west of where we had started diving on the first day. Then she came to anchor.

"That's the game all right," said Timms, handing me the glasses. "'Enry's a-puttin' on 'is suit. We can't do nothin'; let's go and 'ave a bit o' grub."

I went back to the tent, saw that the doctor's condition was unchanged—then joined Timms in the hut, where he had a rough and ready meal prepared. I was too upset to eat much. I lighted my pipe.

"Look here, Timms," I said, "I've got a scheme—a pretty mad one I'll admit, but there's a possibility of it working. Know anything about kapok?"

He shook his head. I took out my sleeping bag.

"Kapok's similar stuff to thistledown, and it's used for stuffing flea-bags like this, also for making life-belts."

"I've seen 'em," he said. "But I don't 'old wiv' nothing but Spanish cork for a life-belt. Wouldn't get me trustin' me fourteen stone six to thistledown—no fear!"

"I'm not proposing to ask you," I went on. "But I want some sort of a life-belt made, one that will support me for a fair length of time and not interfere with my swimming or subsequent actions."

"Gawd lumme!" he cried, "what bloomin' scheme are you planning now? You ain't a-goin' to risk your life wiv a thing like that? You're crazed—it's madness—an' what—Gawd—no—no—it ain't reasonable!"

"What is, for that matter?" I answered. "I'm going to have a shot at holding up the launch after dark. There's no more risk in that than there is in staying on the island and dying of thirst and hunger and vexation. Can you do it?"

"Aye, to be sure I can. I'd be a poor sort of sailorman if I couldn't do a bit o' stitchin'. An' I got a palm an' needle in my dicky bag—but—it don't sound safe——"

"Right-o," I interrupted hastily. "Here's the bag—cut it as you like, but make the belt with a fair pad under my chest, so that my head will keep well out of water."

"But what about the sharks—didn't you know there was such things?"

"Very few round here. You're thinking of Durban, or Hong Kong, or the Whitechapel Road on pay night. Don't you worry about me. I'm not so keen on suicide as you think."

"Well, well," he answered, taking hold of the bag, and eyeing it critically. "Be it so. Each of us is mad in 'is own particular way. I'll make yer little bathin' suit for you—Gawd forgive me if you're drowned. . . . What's the idea?"

"I'm going to swim out with the tide from the point yonder after dark," I said, "and trust to luck to finding them unprepared. I'll take the pistol and hold 'em up. If they are prepared, I'll simply

swim aslant the tide, and make the lagoon. It's that or nothing."

He whistled.

"Madness—bloomin' madness," he muttered. "Flyin' in the face o' Providence."

I went out and left him to his task.

That day was the longest I have ever known. I wonder now how I kept my reason, for although except for an occasional glance at the doctor, I never relaxed my watch on the launch and dhow, I saw nothing that gave me a clue to the fate of Patricia. My imagination tortured me. She would not have yielded without a struggle, I knew. She might have fallen in a desperate effort to save herself. . . . might even now be lying dead. . . .

As Timms had predicted, Trout went down, but two of the natives—with weights tied to their feet—dived also, the white man resting only from twelve until two. The launch did not move very far, though. Apparently the Egyptian was confident that the wreck still lay near the channel. They ceased operations shortly before dusk, when a shout from Timms took me back to the hut.

The life-belt was finished. I tried it on, and found that it fitted me well. Luckily the fabric of my sleeping-bag was waterproof gaberdine. The belt, I hoped, would support me with ease, and leave my limbs free for action.

To understand the plan I had in mind, it must be remembered that the ebb tide current, which was strong and swift, set north, and that the launch was now anchored but a few yards west of a line drawn due north from Sandy Point, at the foot of

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Lighthouse Hill. If, therefore, I entered the sea at the last-named point, the current should bear me almost directly on to the launch. Confident though I was in my strength as a swimmer, I knew that I should have to nurse myself in view of a possible fight. With the aid of the life-belt no output of energy beyond the actual steering would be necessary. I should drift like a log in a mountain stream.

The tide would be favourable about seven. It was now about six. I went into the tent and relieved Howard, while he got something to eat in the hut. The doctor was still unconscious, but his temperature had risen and he was rambling again. It was pathetic to see him lying there, babbling of his precious skulls, yet my mind was far away. Love is a selfish thing.

When Charley returned I set about my preparations. Success I knew would depend upon surprise, and it was essential that I should make myself as inconspicuous as possible.

I changed into very dark drab gaberdine trousers and a tunic shirt to match, then smeared my face and arms with a mixture of boot polish and vaseline.

"I'll go down to the beach alone," I said to Captain Timms.

"If anything unfortunate should happen, I'll be glad if you'd arrange things. There's a letter which contains all the necessary information, but the next thing you hear will be the siren of the launch. If you hear three blasts in half an hour, you'll know that everything has gone well. If you hear one long and awful blast, you'll know—but my voice

won't carry so far ! Cheerio ! I rely upon you to look after the doctor."

"Gawd ! but you 'ave got a nerve," he said with emotion, as we shook hands and parted.

Gaining the beach by the path, I walked south until the curving back of the cliff told me that I had reached the extremity of Sandy Point. Then I stopped and fixed the belt. I wrapped the pistol as before in my oilskin tobacco pouch, and placed it in its holster. Three spare magazines were stuck in the bandolier across my shoulder, and my hunting knife was safe in its sheath at my waist.

I waded out waist deep, and tested the life-belt. It floated me perfectly with my head well out of water, and I struck out across the arm of the lagoon to the fringing reef, which at this point ran about two hundred yards from the land. At once I began to feel the force of the tide drifting me north, but I gained the reef before it had taken me off my settled course. Here the water was shallow, and for twenty yards or so I walked the bottom, with the breaking surf thumping up against my chest and spraying over my head. But the current gripped me strongly, and soon I was well away out of the breakers, bearing straight down on the launch, whose twin lights sent a double wavering trail of gold across the heaving top of the sea.

I did not swim, I simply floated, though I was ready at any time to kick out, in case the current changed its course. The water was pleasantly cool, and I felt myself enjoying the experience. My self-confidence more than neutralised any fear that might start creeping into my mind. So long as I was

moving, so long as the adventure was under way, my imagination and nerves were a negligible quantity. I was aware of one thought—Dusi Khan and the defeating of him, and that was a momentum which would have carried me anywhere. At the end of twenty minutes the twinkling points of light had resolved themselves into electric lamps, and the hull of the launch showed up against the starshine of the Northern sky.

There was no singing to-night, nor did I hear the sound of talking yet from either launch or dhow. Dusi Khan would undoubtedly have put the sailors on their guard. He would know by this time that I had swum out to the dhow on a previous occasion. Did he think me capable of doing the same to the launch, risking the surf and the tide? Sincerely I hoped not. If he kept a watchful guard against boarders, my plan was doomed. An ordinary lookout I did not fear, knowing the failings of the average undisciplined African native.

A few strokes shorewards and I had the launch dead in my path; five minutes more and my fingers sought and closed round the tight-drawn cable, and my feet swinging with the tide touched her stem. I hung on and listened, breathless.

Someone was speaking in Ki-Swahili—Dusi's voice, I thought—yet there was a touch of autocratic dignity in it entirely new to me.

"Watch well, and sleep not," he said. "The penalty for him who sleeps at his post you know."

"Yes, O Great One," answered two voices almost in unison.

"It is well," he replied, "and as ye watch the

boat and the sea around, so shall the Great One watch ye."

So far as I could make out, the speakers were on the bridge. Evidently the watch was set there, for the position commanded the whole length of the ship. I waited, confident that my coming had not been seen, that at present I was not within the watchmen's area of visibility.

Immediately above me, and within my grasp if I cared to make it so, was the mermaid's figure-head, projecting a foot or more from the actual prow. The forecastle deck stretched a good third of the boat's length, and terminated at the miniature bridge and the navigation house. Double awnings were rigged above it. I noticed also that the dinghy lay along the starboard side, about amidships, her painter secured to the rail.

The crew apparently were sleeping on the after deck, for I could now hear snoring and the occasional mutter of drowsy conversation. Was there another watch? I listened intently for movement on the forecastle deck. Apparently it was deserted. Would the awnings hide it from the bridge? Unfortunately, it was illuminated by one of the two lights I had seen. My head would be visible instantly I raised it above the figure-head. Well, that I must risk if I were to risk anything at all. I slid my hand up the cable, and pulled myself clear of the sea, then with my legs twisted firm round the tight-drawn rope, I reached for the figure-head, got a grip and swayed over, finding myself now in a most ridiculous pose with my arms round the mermaid's neck, legs dangling over her curved-up tail. I breathed a

prayer to the designer of that appendage, for without its support I should have been forced to go higher on to the deck or drop back into the sea again. It gave me an opportunity for resting and for preparing for the final effort. My plan was simple enough—to hold up the watchmen, wound them if necessary, then deal as circumstances permitted with Dusi Khan. Once I had that rascal powerless, the rest would or ought to be plain sailing. I unwrapped my pistol and tried the mechanism; then as I started to crawl upwards came the soft pad pad of feet on the deck, and the voice of Dusi Khan.

“*Voilà*, m’selle, your supper cooked, might one say, to perfection. A little champagne also from the private cabin of your excellent brother. May I assist you?”

I slipped gently back to the security of the mermaid’s neck and tail.

“M’selle has no appetite,” he continued. “M’selle would take *un petit vermouth*? But no? But this is sadness. May one say how beautiful m’selle looks with eyes so angry. . . . *Ma foi*, but you will have the champagne then. *Voilà*, I will drink with you.” I heard the sound of a breaking bottle.

“Is it not priceless? Champagne for a gentleman who has lain like a beast in the swamps for three whole days. But he will share it with the beautiful young English whose brave brother is so far away. Listen, can you not hear the snoring of those pigs on the island? The gallant Flint and his baby Cleveland, and that beer barrel

Timms? Ah, and your dear brother. *Voilà*, to show what regard I have I will unloose your pretty hands. They will scratch? But no, now you will drink—*mon Dieu!* but you will pay for that—*devil—devil!*”

A scream, and a string of French and Arabic curses followed. Furiously I struggled to reach the deck, my right hand slipped off a grease-plate, and in endeavouring to seize the rope with my left I released my grip on the pistol. . . . Before I had recovered my balance, the weapon fell into the sea. . . . But that did not stop me. I was blind with rage. I reached up again, this time found a secure hold and drew myself on to the deck. And there was Dusi Khan, his back towards me, his arms round Patricia, who was lying on a Beira chair, her feet and legs bound together with rope. She could not see me; I was glad, for with my face all black and the water dripping from me I must have made a terrifying sight.

Dusi Khan was too much occupied with his efforts to avenge her blow to notice me. I struck him first in the small of his back, then, as he turned, on the point of his chin. I hit hard, for I felt that the occasion demanded it, and as he sank to the deck I whipped out my hunting knife and gave it to Patricia. I had no time to assist her, for the alarm had been given, and already the after deck was in commotion.

I felt in Dusi's pockets for a weapon; he was unarmed. I stood up in time to see a big Swahili appear at the top of the port staircase. I rushed at him, a pistol cracked behind his shoulder, and I

saw the malicious face of our late skipper Hamzar in the flash of it.

"The dinghy, starboard side. Push off; I'll join you," I bawled to Patricia, who was already free. The pistol cracked again; I got home one good smack on the big Swahili's heart and the next moment I was on the deck with four big smelly brutes on top of me. One of them got a grip on my throat. He collapsed when my fist found a target in his unprotected stomach. I rolled out from under him, and thanks to the indifferent light (we were in the shadow of the navigation house) and my camouflaged face, and the general confusion, the rest of them went for him and left me for a moment free. Then I heard the voice of Dusi Khan—oh, that I had hit him harder!

"Fools, the little boat, the white woman, hasten."

* My opponents jumped to their feet. I tripped one of them, but another gave me a blow on the shoulder with a club. His arm was raised again, but I dodged, and the club fell on the knee-cap of a fifth assailant, who had just come up the staircase, felling him like a log. That was my chance. One leg was already dangling over the side of the boat, I rolled over, received another bang on the back of my neck, and fell into the sea. I had a sensation of diving deep down to the bottom, and remaining there for hours and hours, of depth charges, mines, torpedoes, exploding and splitting me and the sea and the earth and heavens into shivery scintillating stars, and then a sensation of rising, rising through the water, and through the air into ether to infinity

and back again—back again to hear the voice of Patricia calling to me out of the darkness.

“Captain Cleveland, hallo! hallo! hallo!”

“Yes, where are you?”

“Ssh—sh——”

The dinghy was almost on top of me. I struck out, touched the stem, and worked round gradually towards the stern. I reached out my hand. It was gripped by hers. A tremendous effort and I was safe on board. I sank on the thwarts exhausted. Then came the sound of squeaking rowlocks and excited voices.

“Quick, quick,” I whispered hoarsely, “the oars——”

“There are no oars,” she replied.

CHAPTER XV

ADRIFT ON THE EBB TIDE

NO weapons, no oars, and a boat full of armed and determined men not a hundred yards away. Capture seemed inevitable.

"Lie down flat," I whispered to Patricia.

Judging by the pale gleaming light we had drifted a quarter of a mile to the north of the launch, and slightly seaward.

"*Upesi, upesi, sana!*" came Dusi's voice from the darkness. "Did ye not hear the voice? She has found him."

"Yes, O Great One, it was to the left."

"No, no, to the right."

"*Kileli*," he ordered. "Row harder."

Luckily the sky was now overcast, the darkness impenetrable; yet the boat was drawing nearer.

"Can you swim?" I whispered.

"Yes, a little."

I took off the belt and fastened it round her. She gave me the knife. We lay at the bottom of the dinghy, our heads just projecting above the gunwale. I could hear the panting of the negroes toiling at the oars, and the *plash, plash*, of the water at the boat's stem. Did Dusi know we had no oars, that the boat moved with the current only?

"Fools, fools, can ye not see it yet?"

Apparently they did not, for the question was not answered. It seemed an interminable age before I heard Dusi's voice again.

"Stop!" he cried suddenly. "Look yonder, Hamzar; what is that?"

The sound of rowing ceased.

"Great Master,"—I recognised our skipper's accent—"I know not. Perhaps it is the boat we seek."

"Then row—*upes!*—*upes!*!"

The boat went about noisily, then came the rhythmic rise and fall of the oars again.

"Get ready," I whispered. "Go in quietly."

I knelt up ready to slip over, then became aware that the boat, instead of coming straight for us, was off in what was apparently the opposite direction.

"Jove! what luck!" I whispered in relief. "They'll never find us now. Are you all right?"

"Yes," she whispered back. "Are you hurt?"

"Not at all."

She gave a little nervous cry.

"Oh, you were splendid—you——"

"S-sh—listen! they've stopped again."

Dusi was speaking, but I only caught one word.

"... shore."

The rowing continued immediately, the noise grew fainter and fainter, until it was drowned in the booming of the surf.

"They'll be trying the lagoon," I said. "He thinks we've got through."

I tried to wrest up one of the floor boards to make an oar, but being made of stout mahogany and well riveted home, they resisted the knife. The situation was desperate, for without any means of propulsion we were absolutely at the mercy of the tide. Already we had drifted a considerable distance from the launch, and what troubled me more, an easterly breeze had sprung up and was helping to take us seawards.

"I'm ready to go in," she whispered.

"No," I answered. "It was madness to think of it before, I had no idea we were so far from the reef. We've simply got to hang on."

"Where are we?"

"I'm afraid our adventure has just begun," I replied with a sinking heart. "We're drifting out to sea."

"Are you sure you're not wounded?"

"Certain."

"You were just wonderful," she said in a way that thrilled through me like electricity, and roused an extraordinary sense of exultation within me. She was safe. The woman I loved was once more in my keeping. What mattered it that we were drifting helplessly out to sea, that my last chance of finding the wreck was gone, that the doctor was sick—probably dying?

I loved her. She was safe.

I had fought for her and won. I wanted to shout my exultation—to take her in my arms, to tell her she was mine—mine—that I should never let her go again.

I reached out my hands to hers. She made no

effort to draw away ; but like the freezing breath of Arctic ice I sensed that old antagonism. I cannot explain it. It was indefinable. More subtle in its quality than thought. Yet had she thrust me from her with all her might and cried that she hated me, she could not have struck a more deadly blow to my hope.

I drew back trembling with emotion. Neither of us spoke. And then suddenly came to my mind the memory of Doctor Flint as I had last seen him, lying in bed as grey as death—his poor bony hands clawing at the blankets—his lips twitching as he babbled of the forty skulls. The forty skulls ! And here was I ready, nay, seeking to break every promise I had made to the poor, dear old man. Love ? Yes, I loved her ; but what right had I to cheat my friend for that ? No, by God, if I was still worthy of the name of man, my duty stood clear-cut before me.

To get back to Thunder Island was not now in my power, but there was a fair chance of our being picked up on the morrow. A dhow might take us to Dar-es-Salam within a couple of days. Only one thing then should actuate my plans—Duty—not to myself, but to the man to whom I had given a solemn promise of fidelity, who had never gone back on his word to me—who was lying sick and helpless. And my duty to Patricia was likewise clear. Fortune had selected me as her rescuer and protector. Did this give me the right to foist my unwanted love upon her ? No ! A thousand times no. Duty bade me protect her, to treat her with the chivalry that was due to her

sex ; but beyond that I swore that nothing would take me until the wreck was found, and the whole wretched business was at an end.

"I don't see what we can do," I said with surprising steadiness of voice. "We are drifting steadily away all the time. But there is a regular route of dhows and small steamers west of Thunder Island. I have every hope of our striking a boat to-morrow. I'm afraid we are in for an uncomfortable night, all the same."

"You don't think I mind that?" she answered.

"Tell me what happened this morning."

"I was asleep in the cabin," she replied. "I was awakened by a loud knocking. I thought it was my brother come back. He had gone to see if there was fresh water on the island. . . . I got up and opened the door, and saw Trout and that terrible Egyptian. They both laughed at me. The Egyptian told me what had happened, and that Trout had decided to work for him. Ugh! What a nasty brute he is! I ordered them out, and—and—they overpowered me."

"God!" I muttered. "I wish I had hit harder. What happened then?"

"They fastened me up in the cabin, and didn't bring me on to the deck until after dark. I think if I'd had a pistol I would have shot myself. Oh! If you only knew what I felt when I heard your voice. . . . I could hardly believe it was true. . . . How did you come?"

I described what had happened on the shore, making no reference, however, to the real nature of Charley Howard's mission. I told her though how

decently he had behaved to Doctor Flint, and that I had every reliance in him.

"Oh, I am pleased," she said with emotion. "It breaks my heart—to——"

"He's as keen as mustard," I cut in quickly. "I could hardly persuade him to leave the tent for food."

I went on to explain the making of the life-belt, and then briefly described the swim itself.

"After all," I said, "we are considerably better off than we were before—from everybody's point of view. So long as Dusi Khan had all the boats we could do nothing for the doctor, and we certainly could not have gone on hunting for the wreck. As it is, we have certainly got a roughish night before us; but I'll bet anything that there'll be a boat in sight before daybreak, then we'll simply get back to Zanzibar or Dar-es-Salam and get help. . . There's no hope now of Fish Island."

Although the two hills of Thunder Island were still easily visible, the low-lying land between and the two islands to the north were either hidden in haze or had sunk into the horizon.

The sea was still calm. My fear that the over-casting of the sky betokened an approaching storm was dispelled, for although there came an occasional flash of lightning in the west, the sky was clearing rapidly and the stars were peeping through.

What had happened to Dusi Khan, I wondered? Would he pursue his search as far as the beach? I doubted it. By this time I reckoned he would have given us up and returned to the launch. Curious that Trout had made no appearance during

the fracas. The discovery of Howard's secret cache of champagne perhaps accounted for that. I wished Dusi joy of his new employé. It would take more than Egyptian magic to keep that worthy on the duty list if there was liquor available. And yet he still had native divers. He would be at work again at daybreak—and we—God knows where we should be! If we were fortunate in striking a dhow, it would take us a couple of days at least to reach Dar-es-Salam, and perhaps another week to secure a boat and return to Thunder Island.

"Are you very upset about things?" Miss Howard broke in on my thoughts.

"No—not exactly," I replied. "But I don't take kindly to letting that Egyptian laugh at us. I find it difficult to reach your fatalistic attitude of mind. Do you feel the same now as you did on the island?"

She laughed.

"It would be hard to say. One's feelings are always relative. When I think of my position an hour ago, this seems—just Heaven. When I think of Doctor Flint ill and practically helpless and the way Dusi has beaten us all—and that he will probably find the wreck, and escape with it—I rage with exasperation. You see, I still believe in the treasure. Perhaps more now—than last night."

"Because of Dusi's appearance?" I asked.

"I can't believe that he is just seeking anthropological specimens."

Should I tell her what Doctor Flint had said? That he had waived his claim to any possible treasure? I decided to wait. In spite of her

apparent coolness, her nerves were still considerably upset, and there would be enough for her to bear without this damning evidence of the treasure's non-existence.

"I can't understand Dusi Khan at all," I said, non-committally. "I'd give a mighty lot to know what is in his mind at present."

I stood up and gazed towards the island. We were now north of Sudi Hill, but there was nothing with which to gauge our movements west. The breeze held. The sky was clear to the horizon. Bad as things were, they might have been considerably worse, I suddenly told myself; and if I had sworn to stick to duty, there was no reason why I should lapse into melancholia.

"I suggest we follow your original advice and try and forget it all," I cried. "We can't do anything but sit or stand, and go on sitting or standing until the dawn of day. The cash in hand, you know. If we had a pack of cards we might play poker for the revolver cartridges. Or as to who has the first chew of my holster. If we had——"

"Stop if-ing," she interrupted. "I've made a discovery, a wonderful discovery. If only—— Oh, wonderfuller still! Would you care for a cigarette?"

"Care for one?" I gasped. "I'd commit murder for one."

She passed me the case.

"I'm afraid they're Egyptian; you don't mind, do you? Or perhaps they make you feel still more murderous?"

"It's all right," I laughed. "The mood's passed. Besides, I'm not working overtime to-night."

We knelt down, struck the lighter, lit our cigarettes and sat up again, shielding the glow of them with our hands. I shall never forget the soothing balm of that tobacco!

"Thank Heaven Egypt can produce things other than Egyptians. This is Heaven—unadulterated."

"I am glad," she answered. "It's no earthly good being miserable. Let's pretend we are a river picnic, shall we? We've just left Twickenham, and——"

"We've got a Fortnum and Mason lunch-basket! Top-hole! Chicken and ham—iced phizz and——"

"Strawberries and cream——"

"Stop!" I protested. "That's too much. I think we'd better pretend we're Arctic explorers."

"Nothing of the kind," she went on ruthlessly. "They're very large ripe strawberries with thick Devonshire cream, and lots and lots of both—and it doesn't matter whether we are ill."

"But what shall we do when the sun goes down and the river gets chilly? I suggest a little dinner at Romano's—and——"

"Oh, but we couldn't possibly want dinner."

"I should. I'd want to go on eating all night, but I think we might see a show."

"Yes, rather. A really clever play with lots of humour in it."

"No, thanks," I said. "No humour for me. I want the Grand Guignol—a bit of real life melodrama—something exciting—something to stir your blood."

We carried on in this strain for an hour or more, and although occasionally we became a little

serious, we contrived very successfully to keep the various wolves from the door. By that time Thunder Island had disappeared from sight in a bank of low-lying cloud. The wind had fallen, and the sea, apart from a long smooth roll, was as calm as an inland lake.

"We're dead on the dhow route now," I remarked. "But the Arabs don't usually travel at night. You must be terribly tired. Won't you lie down at the bottom? Look, the life-belt will make quite a comfy pillow."

"No, certainly I won't," she said. "You must lie down yourself."

"I simply couldn't if I wanted to. Please, we'll take it in turns. You lie down first."

"No," she said emphatically.

"All right, then; we'll both sit up, and I shall probably die of nervous exhaustion."

"Please don't be silly."

"I'm not; it's you who are being mutinous. There can be no doubt that I am the skipper of this ship. You're disobeying orders."

She laughed.

"You're not the skipper. You're on the sick list. If you're not wounded, you must be terribly bruised. Lie down at once."

"Very well; let's toss for it. Will you abide by the result if we draw lots?"

"Yes, if you will be honest about it."

"Right-o! Hold the cigarette-case in one of your hands. . . . Got it? It's in your left."

"Oh," she protested, "you saw me; it isn't fair!"

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"Nonsense, I was looking the other way. Now just be a nice obedient sailor and do what the captain tells you."

"Half an hour only, then," she said; "and I feel a perfect pig doing it. Take my watch, please, and wake me up to the second—if you don't——"

She lay down and I took her seat in the stern.

But she would not sleep." We went on chatting until the half-hour was up, then she insisted that we changed places.

I lay down with the firm determination of mind that the next time we changed places should be the last, that she should then have the life-belt pillow until morning.

But in this respect I was frustrated, for no sooner had my eyes closed than I fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER XVI

THE NOISE IN THE SKY

IT was somewhere about five o'clock on the afternoon of the day following our escape from the launch. Patricia lay asleep on the floor of the dinghy, while I, standing on the stern thwart to command a better view, kept watch over the sea.

My hope that morning would find us in sight of shipping had proved ill-founded. I had not reckoned upon the possibility of a dead calm, lasting almost without intermission throughout the day. There had not been a breath of air since shortly after sunrise, when a thunderstorm, passing a little to the south of us, had produced a mild hesitating squall. It was perhaps fortunate that we had not sighted any dhows, for we should have only had the exasperation of seeing them becalmed and helpless to rescue us.

The thunderstorm had provided us with a small quantity of quickly lukewarm water, long since exhausted. We had not eaten, and had suffered considerably from the sun, which, reflecting from the sea, had twice its ordinary fierceness.

Yet for all this Patricia's cheerfulness and optimism had never for one minute waned. She had let me sleep until sunrise, and then only consented to lie down for a couple of hours, after which she joined

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me in my watch, chatty, joking, laughing as though it *was* a river picnic we were on, and not an uncomfortable, dangerous adventure.

It is quite incomprehensible to me now that I did not weaken in my resolve, and declare my hopeless love. Apart from her beauty and wonderful charm, there were qualities manifest in her which by themselves would have gone to the heart of any man and made him desire her as a mate. Courage, tenderness, unselfishness, an infinite capacity of understanding, all these qualities were hers. Not a single word of complaint left her lips; she would have had me drink every drop of that scanty supply of water; she would have made me lie down with that life-belt as a pillow and never have stirred.

Little credit can I claim that I did not give way, for had she shown by one single glance that her antagonism had changed, my resolve would have snapped like a rotten twig. I should have been down on my knees before her, raving of my love, telling her I wanted her more than anything else in life. . . .

I had never ceased in my efforts to analyse her attitude towards me.

I could not believe that she disliked me. I could not believe that it was just her pride, her consciousness about her brother's dishonour, that caused it.

Yet there it was, like an unseen battery of positive electric poles eternally engaging and repulsing the positiveness in me.

She had lain down about two o'clock, and she stirred now for the first time. I got down from

the thwart as she awakened and sat up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"Nothing to report," I said. "But I have a sort of feeling that we'll get a breeze before long, and that's bound to stir the shipping up."

"Lie down now," she answered. "I'll wake you when I see anything."

"But I don't want to. I'd much prefer to talk. I wonder what's happening on Thunder Island. Do you—— *God*——" I stopped abruptly. My ears had caught a dull peculiar drone, like that of a turbine engine.

We jumped up on to the thwart.

"Can you hear it?"

"Yes; it sounds like a ship."

We listened tensely. It seemed to come from the north, yet there was neither mast nor smoke visible on the hazeless horizon.

"It must be a ship or a motor-boat," I said. "Sound travels a fearful way in calm weather like this. I doubt whether it will come in view."

Yet the sound, while varying in its pitch, grew persistently louder.

"Could it be a submarine?" she whispered.

"No; it seems like a—*by Jove*," I shouted excitedly. "*It's an aeroplane. Look!*"

I could hardly believe the evidence of my own eyes. Flying south and on a course that would in a matter of minutes bring it immediately overhead was a large seaplane.

"Wave your hands," I shouted, seizing the life-belt and ripping it across.

"Don't stop for a second."

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I struck the lighter and set fire to the kapok. It was still a little damp and smoked heavily. I waved it from side to side.

"Will they see us?" I heard Miss Howard cry.

"It's an even chance; they're flying very low."

The machine was now scarcely a quarter of a mile away and it was not more than 2,000 feet up. With a queer thrill I recognised it as a Scott-Hemery, practically identical with one I had used on my African flight, and a type now used at the Air Force base at Zanzibar. Yet her markings, such as I could see, were not those of a British machine. She carried one person only. I could make out the top of his head in the pilot's cockpit.

Would he see us?

I waved that burning life-belt about until I was choked with the fumes, and Patricia moved her arms as though she were doing Indian clubs.

It was now almost overhead, and its course was not more than a hundred yards to the east of us. Would the sun interfere with the pilot's sight? God! I could see it glinting on his goggles. He was looking our way. He was looking *down*!

"He's seen us," I yelled. "No—yes—by Jove——"

The pilot had sat up and was waving a hand. Then suddenly the machine went down into one of the most thrilling, awe-inspiring nose-dives it has ever been my lot to witness.

Patricia gave a gasp of terror.

"He's falling!" she cried.

But I knew better. It was swank, pure unadulterated swank, and so shallow are the human

emotions that as I watched the machine spinning like a leaf to earth, I experienced quite a strong wave of jealousy. I had been a stunt pilot myself in the old days, and although I say it who shouldn't, there were very few people of the Air Force who could "stunt" a big machine better than I, particularly a Scott-Hemery. But this man, whoever he was, was a "star."

"Don't be alarmed," I said; "he'll come out all right."

He did; a hundred feet from the water the machine flattened out, made an almost vertical turn, glided down and touched the water as gracefully as an aquatic bird. It taxied up and came to a stop a dozen yards away from us, and then the pilot stood up from his seat and removed his helmet and goggles.

At a glance I knew he was a foreigner, either an Italian, Spaniard or Portuguese, for his face was charged with that vivacity which you will find only in the Southern people of Europe. It was swarthy, his hair jet black, his eyes dark and flashing, and guarding a mouthful of big white teeth like a pair of sentinels with bayonets fixed, with a double-tufted moustache with long waxed points.

"What is the mat-taire?" he shouted. "You English, yes? Ah yes, I think so. I speak English very well, yes? I see you signal. I came down very quick. Tell me, what is the mat-taire. Have you been wrecked? What——"

I thought he was never going to stop.

"We've drifted away from a yachting party," I

cut in, "last night. Can you help us. You haven't got wireless, have you?"

"No, I have not the wireless. I am the full Lieutenant Suero Gonzalez of the aeroplane force of the Portuguese Colonial Army. I served in the war."

He stripped back his flying coat and modestly exposed a double row of very gaudy decorations.

"I bring this old 'bus over from Zanzibar. Jolly good 'bus, no, yes? My old Government buy six of them from His Majesty Britannia Government. I am fly now to Port Amelia, but I have grave feelings that I do not get there to-night. But what does that mat-taire? Where is your yacht?"

He rattled this off at express speed, and not for one second did he take his flashing eyes from Miss Howard.

I gave him a tactful account of ourselves. We belonged to a private scientific expedition that had its headquarters on Thunder Island. We had been caught in a storm, lost our oars and drifted out to sea.

"You are wife and husband, yes?" he inquired, with embarrassing direction.

"No," I answered stiffly. "We are anxious to get in touch with a dhow or ship to take us to Dar-es-Salam or Zanzibar. You didn't sight any shipping, did you?"

"No, I see no ship; but then I do not look for ship. Look here. By Jove!" he added, twirling the point of his ridiculous moustache. "I take you in my old 'bus. Jolly good, yes?"

"I say, that's very good of you," I cried with mixed feelings.

"I should simply love it," Patricia joined in. "It was wonderful, watching you come down."

He laughed, and addressing himself to her, "Oh, you very safe with me, misses. You have ascended before? Jolly good, I assure you. Top-hole. You have grave apprehensions when you see me descend? All right, I only do that when I am by myself."

I breathed a silent prayer.

"Look here," he went on breathlessly. "I throw you the rope and then you come. You tell me where you want to go. I think we are all in bally fix, depend upon it. I am due Port Amelia at eighteen hours, and now it is seventeen hours and one half. You understand I was caught in bally thunderstorm and lose—what you call it—yes, I lose my compass."

He threw the line. I caught it and pulled the dinghy alongside the floats. A thrill went through me as that wonderful combination of petrol fumes, dope and oil assailed my nostrils. The smell of an aeroplane to an airman is like the smell of a ship to a sailor. I had an almost overwhelming desire to climb straight into the pilot's cockpit and get the controls in my hands again. She was, as I have said, practically identical with my old machine, except that the ordinary landing carriage had been fitted to a set of floats.

. How much dare I tell this extraordinary Portuguese? If *he* was bound for Port Amelia, his course could take him direct over Thunder Island. In

spite of his apparent inconsequence we could not expect him to turn back to Dar-es-Salam. Should we be any better off if we returned to the island? With the seaplane to use as we liked we certainly should. We could terrify the natives with it, possibly recapture the launch, and—I trembled at the thought—find the sunken wreck in a matter of minutes. The water near the reef was wonderfully clear. From the air the whole bottom would be revealed as through a window.

I had considerable experience of the Portuguese. I had travelled in Portugal and in Portuguese East Africa, and I had never encountered an official lower than the rank of Deputy-Governor or Colonel who had not frankly professed himself open to bribery. It seems to be almost a national characteristic. Would full Lieutenant Suero Gonzalez be inclined the same way? His pay, I knew, would be absurdly low. It was too late now for him to get to Port Amelia. I could persuade him to land us on Thunder Island and spend the night at the camp. I fancy the doctor, if we were well again, would be agreeable to putting a very generous proposition before him. The idea took possession of me. He was now busy explaining to Patricia the precise meaning of each of his splendid collection of ribbons, and he was not sparing himself in the matter of modesty.

I apologised for interrupting, and asked him to show us his map and point out our present whereabouts. We were about fifty miles due north of Thunder Island, just under an hour's flight. It would be dark by the time we got there. I put my

proposition to him, that he should "land" on the eastern lagoon and partake of the camp's hospitality for the night. There would be time then to explain matters further.

"Oh yes, I shall be delighted," he said without hesitation. "You get in and not delay. You sit near to me, misses. You will be interested in the way I work the things. Jolly interesting, I can assure you. I have got a little food here. I can see you are very hungry. Come on now, you get up."

She was a three-seater, as was my own—one alongside the pilot's and a third behind. Patricia quite calmly climbed up, and the Portuguese fastened her belt and offered her a parcel of sandwiches and a water-bottle from a locker below his seat.

"You can eat, mister—when we get ascending," he said to me. "Now I got to turn the bally propeller."

He did not show any surprise when I stood out on the floats to do this for him, nor when I explained in a few words that I was a pilot myself. He was far too interested in Patricia. A few swings of the propeller and I stood back. He turned the self-starting handle and the engine spluttered into life.

"Get in very quick," he shouted. "No time to waste, no?"

Patricia passed me the water-bottle and the sandwiches.

"Isn't it just thrilling?" she shouted, above the boom of the engine.

"Rather," I bawled back. But I was still feeling

ridiculously jealous. I loathe all foreigners, and the way this fellow was putting on side and making eyes at Patricia was getting on my nerves.

Besides, there is nothing better calculated to distract an airman's peace of mind than to make an ascent with a strange pilot at the controls, no matter how skilful the latter may be. It is not ordinary fear. I'd feel the same if I went up with the best man living.

Judging by his slang, Mr. Gonzalez had been trained with a British squadron. I had met several of his countrymen during the war, but this was the first in my experience who had turned out a brilliant pilot, and such I'll readily admit he was.

. . . His landing had been faultless.

There was still no wind, and without condescending to fasten his own "safety belt," he opened the throttle and away we went. A thrill went through me as we left the water, and the machine put its nose up in a "zoon" that lifted us in a matter of seconds to a hundred feet. Ah! There is no aeroplane built that can compare with a Scott-Hemery. All the old fever came back. My fingers itched for the feel of the joy-stick. I could have wished that our friend would suddenly be taken ill, and that I could bundle him out of his seat and take the controls even as an observer of mine had done with me that time I was wounded over Ypres. . . .

I can laugh now at the absurdity of it all. Instead of leaning back in my comfortable seat and marveling at the wonderful stroke of fortune that had come to me, instead of rejoicing at the prospect of being

at Thunder Island in an hour, beating Dusj Khan and possibly finding the wreck, I was just like a vain, idiotic schoolboy, full of murderous plans because a rival has beaten him on the playing fields.

We climbed more steadily from 200 feet, and at 4,000 the pilot throttled down and put the machine on a direct course for the island.

While we had made our amazing embarkation, the sun had set and now the light was failing quickly.

Gonzalez apparently was not at all perturbed at the prospect of making a landing in the dark. He was now engaged pointing out the various controls for Patricia's benefit, and while I detected a little self-consciousness in her face as she half-turned towards me I saw nothing else there but an almost boyish excitement. I believe she was thoroughly enjoying herself.

She had not eaten the sandwiches, however. Neither had I. There was a little shelf in front of me, with a writing block and a pencil. I drew a rough sketch of Thunder Island, marked the eastern lagoon which runs the full length of the eastern coast, and put a big T at the southern end of it where I hoped we should be able to descend. If we taxied into the shore there was a path, I remembered, that would take us almost directly to the camp. I passed the sketch to him, and after a rapid glance he nodded vigorously. Apparently he understood.

A quarter of an hour had passed before we got our first sight of the island, a dark smudge scarcely

distinguishable from the black-blue sea. I reckoned it to be four miles away. Our height was then 5,000 feet.

"Fly east," I bawled in the pilot's ear. I had little hope of Dusi not hearing our approach, but the less obvious our arrival was, the better it would be. But no sooner had he deflected to the east than, without a moment's warning, the engine stopped! My heart came into my mouth. Getting up, I leaned forward over the pilot's shoulder.

He had depressed the controls instantly and put the machine into a glide before pumping feverishly at the petrol feed.

"What's wrong?" I shouted.

"I not know," he bawled back. "I think petrol finish."

"Go on—for lagoon," I shouted, and to Patricia: "It's all right; we can land easily."

She smiled a little nervously.

Could we reach the lagoon? Our height, when the engine stopped, was 4,000 feet; our distance from the northern end of the island roughly four miles. A Scott-Hemery would glide a mile for every thousand feet of altitude. That should bring us easily half-way down the lagoon. If only—oh, how I craved to be in the pilot's seat! . . . The light had failed so that now I could read the instruments on the dash-board by their phosphorous paint. Only the hand of the speed indicator and altimeter showed movement. The latter was creeping slowly down.

The machine made very little sound. The bracing wires of the Scott-Hemery are all skilfully

designed to offer a minimum of resistance, and as the Portuguese was making the glide as flat as possible, our speed was no more than forty miles an hour.

"Keep—close—to—the—coast," I said.

"All right," he answered complacently. "I land all right. Jolly good, yes? You not frighten, misses?"

In spite of myself I could not help but admire the man's nerve, for landing in comparative darkness on the water is one of the most difficult things imaginable. I had had a fair amount of practice with seaplanes, and anxious though I might be to take his place, I should not have faced the prospect with such equanimity.

The island now had grown more definite. I could distinguish clearly Fish and Curlew Island and the dividing straits, and, a minute later, a pale light gleaming on the slope of Lighthouse Hill. I pointed to it excitedly.

"The camp!" I cried to Patricia. I could not distinguish the boats. Had they gone? Had the wreck been found? . . . We should know soon. The altimeter now was down to 2,000 feet. The north end of the island was not a quarter of a mile ahead.

"I see all right," said the Portuguese. "We do jolly easy, depend upon it."

Fifteen hundred feet, and we were abreast of the land; eight hundred feet and the beginning of the lagoon was astern.

"Keep near in," I bawled.

He turned a little and then steered parallel

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with the beach, which now showed faintly between the sea and the land. Five hundred feet, four hundred, three hundred . . . two hundred. The sea beyond Lighthouse Hill had disappeared from sight, the summit was mounting up to the sky. One hundred, one hundred and fifty, the land was rushing swiftly past us, the breakers on the eastern reef made a continuous white line. Fifty feet. I held my breath. The machine flattened out and began to sink. A sudden bump—we shot up—and quickly down again; another bump, another bound, and then with a splash the floats took the water and held.

“Turn in,” I shouted.

We were about fifty yards from the beach. He turned gently, and half a minute later there came a gentle shudder as the floats ran on to the sand. It was the most magnificent performance I had ever witnessed. I clapped my hands on his shoulder.

“Bravo!” I cried, in boundless admiration.

“It was splendid,” Patricia added, with no less enthusiasm.

And Lieutenant Suero Gonzalez contented himself by remarking, “Jolly good, yes?”

Thus did we make our return to Thunder Island.

We had landed scarcely a stone's throw from the point I had marked on my sketch. The plucky little Portuguese and I got out and pulled the machine in to the water's edge. Then Patricia joined us.

“Well, that bally job's over,” our friend said, preening his moustache. “I tell you I make good

descent, yes? I am easy the best pilot, of our army, depend upon it. What we do now, eh? Is your camp near? I could do with a drink, old thing, bet your life. Come on!"

"But what about the machine?" I asked. I did not feel happy at the thought of leaving it unguarded.

"Oh, the old 'bus all right," he replied. "We'll tie her up. I have anchor. Come on, we'll fix that up."

He climbed up to his seat again and produced a useful-looking aluminium grapple. He made a rope fast to the undercarriage and we ran it ashore, burying the grapple deep in the sand and piling a heap of coral rock upon it.

She would be safe for the time being, at any rate, and we would learn at the camp whether we might expect interference from Dusi Khan. The chances were that our arrival had not been noticed at all, thanks to our enforced descent—without the engine.

"How are you feeling?" I asked Miss Howard.

"Oh, quite all right," she answered. "It was a most thrilling adventure, wasn't it? I've never been in an aeroplane before. I almost forget what——" she hesitated. "They're at the camp, don't you think? The light——"

"I'm sure of it," I interrupted quickly, for I was not yet certain how I should acquaint our friend with the true state of affairs. "What was wrong?" I asked him.

"I do not know. At first I think petrol finish

—but I know now that impossible. But what does it mat-taire. We are here—old thing. Tomorrow I will come back and fix her up, depend upon it.”

It took us nearly an hour to find the path, and it was more overgrown than any of the others I had seen on the island. By the time we reached its junction with the main path, the one I had taken the day of my first exploration, our clothes were torn to shreds and our hands and faces were painfully scratched by the thorns. I led the way, and although I tried repeatedly to have a talk with Patricia, the Portuguese was so arduous in his attentions to her that I could only manage to warn her by means of a few whispered words not to communicate about our affairs. She understood, however, and cleverly kept him to his own—a subject in which, to tell the truth, he seemed particularly interested.

As we drew nearer the camp a horrible sensation of alarm took hold of me. We had seen the light, it was true, but that did not necessarily portend that all was well. By this time the poor old doctor might have died, Dusi Khan might have landed and taken charge. Timms—for the first time I remembered the whisky. If Timms and Howard had started on that . . . !

But it was too late for recrimination. In a few minutes now we should know the worst. We were already on the slopes of Lighthouse Hill. . . . I wished that Mr. Gonzalez would lower his voice a little. Yet how could I explain the danger if I did not explain the other things as well? Perhaps

it would be better if I did take him partially into our confidence now. Under the pretence of having missed the path, I called a halt.

"Lieutenant Gonzalez," I said. "I have not told you everything about ourselves."

"Oh, that's all right, old thing," he interrupted hurriedly. "I want a drink; come on."

"Yes, but perhaps we cannot go on. I will tell you now. Our expedition is scientific, but we look for a collection of specimens—do you understand? Specimens which were taken from some catacombs in Africa. They were sunk in a ship five years ago. We look for that ship. But someone else is also looking for that ship. The big man of an African Search Society."

"Ah, you not mean Dusi Khan," he said, to my amazement.

"You know him?"

"Bet your life. I live in Africa two years now. I think I know him jolly well. My Government very glad to get hold of him rather. You know anything about that rebellion in Mafika? Oh yes! that was Dusi Khan. Very clever fellow, believe me. Where is he now?"

I explained carefully that Dusi Khan had captured the launch (I made no mention of our own dhow), and that there was a possible chance of his being at the camp, which meant that we should have to approach it carefully. He took from his pocket a small Mauser pistol.

"Why did you not tell me subsequently?" he said. "I have big pistol in the old 'bus there. To-morrow I will fly to Port Amelia and inform my

Government. Jolly good idea? Then they send warship."

"Very good idea," I said. "But I still think our people are safe at the camp. Let us go on, quietly."

"Oh yes, all right. You stay by me, misses. I will protect you. You will be safe with me, depend upon it."

My face went very hot, and without another word I pushed on, feeling absurdly angry. I suppose love unbalances the mind of every man. It certainly did mine. I wanted to kick the Portuguese, kick him very hard. Worse still, I wanted to go for Patricia for encouraging him in his confounded impertinence. It was little comfort to tell myself that she had not, that the Portuguese was a damn fine fellow, and had saved both our lives. I was looking at things through a contorted mirror.

Fifteen minutes later we reached the old fort, immediately above the camp. We halted. No light was visible below.

"I think I'll go on alone," I whispered to Miss Howard. "You—er—don't mind staying."

"No, of course not," she answered with a readiness that I did not appreciate. "But you won't be long. Will you signal?"

"I'll give you a shout," I answered, "if everything's O.K."

I moved very cautiously, for the path was strewn with loose noisy stones. My premonition now that I was alone had come back stronger than ever. I wished that my pride had not stopped me from borrowing the Portuguese pistol.

If anything was wrong, if Dusi Khan was, at the camp—good heavens! I was turning into a first-class coward; I, Dennis Cleveland, with all my talk of adventures, romance and the rest of it, actually trembled at the prospect of encountering a contemptible Egyptian seditionist and a handful of miserable negroes. Shame, thank Heaven, got the better of my emotions. Sure now of the ground, I descended faster, and a minute later reached the fringe of bush that guards the ledge above the one on which the camp was made. Leaning over, I had a perfect view. The fire was smouldering, and through the doctor's tent there came a faint glow. Beyond all doubt it was occupied.

I listened, and then to my unexpressible relief I heard the voice of the doctor himself. He was safe. Thank God! I could not hear what he was saying. I went back to the path, crept cautiously down until I found a convenient bush not ten yards away from the tent itself.

"Better than any medicine in the world. Sickness, whether it be physical or mental, is but a condition of mind. Concentrate sufficiently to let a good book get a grip on you, my boy, and——"

I didn't wait for any more. I ran forward to the tent, and there was the old doctor sitting up on his bed, and at his side, an open book in his hand, was Howard.

"I say, Cleveland!" the latter shouted.
The doctor jumped up.

"Cleveland, is it you?" he cried. "Oh, my boy!"

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I gripped his hand and could scarcely keep back the tears, so great was my emotion.

"Your sister's up the hill," I said to Howard. "Shout."

He went out, and for nearly a minute the old man remained with our hands clasped together. Then very quickly I told him my story.

But if mine was astounding, his was equally so. *Captain Timms had disappeared.* According to Charley Howard (for the doctor had not regained consciousness until this morning), Timms had gone down to the beach late last night in the hope of finding me, and since then nothing had been seen or heard of him. He was not drunk, I gathered. All the whisky was safe in the tent, and neither he nor Charley had taken more than a tot each. I was terribly upset at this tragic news. Timms, it is true, was chiefly responsible for most of our present trouble, but I had a tremendous affection for him.

"And Dusi Khan, sir?" I inquired.

"They have been busy all day," the old man told me sadly. "Young Howard has been watching, and he tells me four natives have been diving continuously. They have been using the small boat, and working a long way north of the channel, close in to the reef. They're going to find the wreck, old fellow. I'm terribly afraid that Egyptian will get it."

I had heard Howard guiding the other two down the path, and I spoke quickly.

"There's just a chance with the aeroplane, sir. The moral effect would be tremendous if we flew

over them while they were diving. He's a Portuguese, I told you. I half think he'll help us without—payment. But if he won't——”

“Offer what you like,” Doctor Flint whispered hoarsely. “A hundred pounds if he'll help us.”

“Right-o, sir,” I whispered back, and then I rushed out to meet them.

CHAPTER XVII

WHAT CAME OF A TIN OF SALMON

I REMEMBER, as a boy; writing in a copy-book, "Small things mould the destinies of men." The phrase came back with a new and poignant meaning when I savagely kicked that salmon-tin into the fire. If anything ever moulded the destinies of men, that had, or rather had its late contents.

It was morning—morning after a night to which the previous two seemed simply uneventful. As soon as I had introduced Lieutenant Suero Gonzalez to Doctor Flint, I had taken him into the hut, given him a drink and a fairly frank statement as to our predicament. It would take a couple of days at least, I pointed out, for a gunboat to come up from Port Amelia, and it looked as though Dusi Khan was already hot on the trail of the wreck.

It was a risky thing, I knew ; but if we swooped down suddenly when the small boat was away at the reef we might stand a very good chance of demoralising the crew of the launch and capturing it. Dusi Khan would then be at our mercy. I was quite willing to hand him over to the Portuguese Government. If there was any reward offered for his arrest, well, I should not claim it. In addition, I pointed out that Dr. Flint was rich.

"Oh, that's all right," the little Portuguese had said complacently. "You leave it to me. I damn well settle him, depend upon it. We go first early morning, yes? You come with me? All right. Jolly good."

Delighted though I had been, I found it hard to keep my temper when he asked me in a confidential whisper: first, if Patricia happened to have a lover; second, if I didn't think she was very impressed with his prowess as an airman. . . .

I had managed to get him back to business, however, and made a definite arrangement that we should start for the beach at daybreak, put the engine right, and then act as circumstances justified.

Patricia and I, both ravenous and unable to wait for the meal that Charley was preparing, had then opened a tin of bully beef and a tin of biscuits. When the meal was ready we had declined the tinned salmon,—which was undoubtedly fortunate, for an hour later Howard and the Portuguese were taken desperately ill. They rolled on the ground like sick mules, groaned with pain, and generally gave the impression that they were at death's door.

Whether they were there I cannot say. The doctor, who had also abstained from the salmon, diagnosed ptomaine poisoning and prescribed accordingly, the medicine being as drastic as the disease. We had fixed them both up in the hut, using Timms's bed and my own, and Patricia and I had kept watch over them until four, when their pain had shown signs of abating.

And now, when the sun was almost above the

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horizon, they still lay helpless in their beds, Howard white as a sheet, the Portuguese with a greyish-blue tinging his coffee-brown skin. They were out of danger, the doctor said, but neither of them would be capable of more than a crawl for another two hours at least.

My adventures so far had been singularly fruitful in the matter of exasperating situations, but surely this was the crowning one. Dusi's divers were already at work, nearly a quarter of a mile away from the launch. I could pick him out easily with my glasses sitting in the stern of the launch's spare dinghy and directing operations.

Circumstances were perfectly ideal for the carrying out of our flight, and there, "distorted and pale" and utterly *hors de combat*, lay the man who could make the whole thing possible.

"What are you going to do?" Patricia asked, coming up to the fire with the empty teapot.

"There's only one thing possible," I answered. "I hardly like doing it. It seems hardly the game to take another man's aeroplane when he's ill."

"You're going to fly?" she cried excitedly.

"I feel inclined to, game or no game, but——"

"Don't you want someone with you?"

"If I did, it would be a distinct advantage. My scheme is to hold up the launch. If I can taxi up close before Dusi Khan has time to get back, two of us ought to be able to do it."

"Then I'll come with you," she said coolly.

I demurred.

"It's too big a risk."

"It's not any bigger than some we've already taken. I know you're a splendid pilot."

A foolish thrill went through me.

"My last flight but one broke your friend's arm," I replied.

"Oh, I'll risk that. Why shouldn't we go? Charley—and—the man will be all right. Oh, do say you will."

To have a companion was certainly necessary. To hold up the launch one of us would have to go aboard, and that would not be particularly safe if the crew were not covered. This might be our last chance.

I went in to the doctor, and without mentioning Patricia's name, I discussed the project with him.

"It's just the matter of the machine," I said. "If it was damaged there'd be trouble, and compensation required."

"Yes, yes," he said. "That mustn't stop you, old boy, if you think you can do it. But you mustn't risk your life. I'd rather lose everything than you should do that."

I didn't wait any longer. I went into the hut, took Mr. Gonzalez's pistol from his coat pocket, and then Patricia and I set off for the eastern beach.

We found the machine practically as we had left her, although with the flood tide she had swung broadside on to the beach. I climbed in to the pilot's cockpit and overhauled the controls. They

were all in perfect trim. I tried the pressure pump, a device for forcing the petrol in the lower tank below the pilot's seat into the tank above the engine, which apparently was empty. And then I discovered the trouble. The pump was out of order. I took it to pieces, tightened a washer, cleansed the valve and put it back. It worked perfectly.

"I shall have to take her up alone first," I said.

"But I'm not a bit afraid. Why waste time? They'll see you, and Dusi Khan will have time to warn the natives," she said. "Do let me get in."

There was certainly wisdom in this. The success of our attack, if such it could be called, depended entirely on surprise. So far we had every reason to assume that Dusi Khan was not aware of the seaplane's arrival. It would be a tremendous shock to him, and naturally the first thing he would do would be to make for the launch and defend it as best he could. I was not exactly stale with my flying, and if anything did go wrong, I could land anywhere inside the lagoon, a vastly different proposition to a force landing on the land, with trees, houses and telegraph lines in the way.

"Come on, then," I cried.

I gave her the small pistol and explained its mechanism. I had already found the larger one, a Mauser automatic, sighted up to a thousand yards, and a very deadly weapon.

"I don't know exactly what our tactics will be," I said.

"Don't fire while we're in the air, though. There's a risk of smashing the propeller. You'll have to take your cue from me."

I got out, pulled the grapple on board, and pushed the craft round, until her nose was pointing seaward; then I gave the propeller a few swings and climbed back to my seat beside Patricia.

"I'm terribly thrilled," she cried.

"More than you were last night?"

"Rather, I believe we're going to succeed. I *feel* it. It thrills me to death."

"And you're not a bit scared?"

"Why should I be?" she answered softly.

I gulped back a lump that had come into my throat, and stammered idiotically.

"I—I'm—going to—to——"

Luckily at that moment my hand closed on the self-starter. I wound it vigorously and with a great roar the engine burst into life.

Slowly we began to move along. There was very little wind, and as that blew from the east I ignored it and steered northward down the lagoon.

"All serene?" I yelled.

"Everything," she shouted back.

I opened the throttle. The speed indicator crept forward—40—50—60. I pulled the joy-stick back and, like a glorious bird, the machine shot up in a zoom which took our breaths away.

Swank? I felt it. I was in the air—in as good a craft as it had ever been my fortune to pilot, the woman I loved was by my side, my enemies awaited.

Your sailormen may talk of the call of the sea, the kick of a ship's wheel, the tang of salt wind ; but the man who has held the controls of a well-trimmed aeroplane in his hands, who has felt the 60-knot drive of the cold upper air in his face, and looked down on the earth and sea from heights stupendous, knows a joy that is superlative of them. There is wine in it, the sparkling exuberance of champagne. It charges your nerves with electric force—it sends the blood pulsing wildly in your veins.

Fifteen hundred feet ! and in less than a minute ! I flattened out, and looked over the side. Fish Island lay below us, and I saw Long Reef stretching like the bleached backbone of a fish, away to the south. The water was crystal clear. But for its tinge of blue one would hardly have distinguished the lagoon as such, for the sandy bottom showed in as much detail as the beach itself. Outside the lagoon there was no sand, but great beds of brown weed, broken by spurs of white coral from the reef.

I turned south and then with my glasses gazed down at the boat, now anchored a quarter of a mile from the entrance of Deep Strait and about fifty yards seawards off Long Reef. Dusi Khan was still in the stern, two negroes were amidships and another was in the water with his hands gripping the gunwales. Only Dusi Khan was looking up. The negroes amidships were evidently hauling on a rope, which by its white festoon of bubbles I traced a fair way through the water.

And then I made out not ten yards away from

them, a big indefinite mass among the beds of weed.

My God! It was the wreck of the sunken dhow!

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ARAB

WE were *beaten*. Dusi Khan had found the wreck. The forty skulls of El Khazar lay already within his grasp. The men still hauled on their rope. In all likelihood the case was fixed on to the other end of it. We had arrived in time to see his victory, in time to see him take what we had risked our lives for, to see him laugh at our helplessness.

Rage took possession of me.

I straightened out, saw that my Mauser was to hand, then turned sharply.

"We're coming down," I bawled. I closed the throttle, pushed the control stick forward, and put the machine into a vertical dive, straight for the boat. The struts whined. I ignored the instruments, holding the control in my left hand, pistol in my right, head leaning out to command a clearer view. The sea seemed to rise to meet us, a flat blue wall. The boat grew and grew like the engine of an approaching express train. The two natives let go of the rope and crouched in terror in the bottom boards. But Dusi Khan stood up, his right hand pointing at us. I saw the flash of a pistol, and laughed wildly. A score of machine guns could not stop me now. One of the negroes suddenly jumped overboard and struck out for the reef.

I was then not a hundred feet away. I fired twice in rapid succession. The second negro made a rush to join his companion. He stumbled against the gunwale. Dusi Khan tried to seize him, and their combined weight on the side already listing with the drag of the rope, heeled completely over.

It was but the fleetest glance I got as I swooped down not ten feet above, yet the memory of it will be with me to my dying day. For I saw Dusi Khan, spitting froth and sea-water from his mouth, make one frenzied effort to seize the keel of the capsized boat. His fingers failed to find a hold, his arms slipped back, and with a look of hellish terror on his upturned face he sank from sight. . . .

Next moment I flattened out and opened the throttle. But the engine did not answer. Something had gone wrong. The floats touched the water and I was obliged to make a landing.

We glided a hundred yards before the hydroplane came to a standstill. Furiously I turned the starting handle. Nothing happened. I got out of my seat and removed the engine cowl. The cylinders were still hot. I looked at the magneto; there was no fault noticeable.

"What are they doing?" I shouted.

"The negroes are nearly at the reef. Yes, they're swimming the lagoon now."

I swore, yet impatience never helped with a "konked" aero engine. I took off my coat, for the heat was unbearable, then started a thorough examination. The starting gear was not at fault.

The carburetter flooded perfectly. Carefully I went over the electric leads, found no sign of a short circuit.

"One of them's reached the beach," cried Patricia. "He's stopped for the others."

The lagoon at the point where they were crossing was only a quarter of a mile in width, and with the tide down there would not be one half of that to swim. In desperation I half opened the throttle, switched on, and swung the propeller with my hands. But it was in vain. By this time the fat negro had reached the shore. I climbed back to the engine and examined the petrol feed.* Both this and the lubricating system were in order—everything, in fact, seemed in perfect order, yet the engine would not give so much as a hectic pop. Once more I removed the cover of the magneto and looked very carefully at the points of the 'make and break.' And there I found a tiny fly, so small, you could have covered it with the point of a pin, so large that it had effectually stopped a 400-horse-power engine, and possibly changed the destinies of a score of men. I removed it, cleaned the platinum points with a penknife, replaced the cowl, jumped into my seat, and turned the starting handle. In ten seconds we were in the air again.

I flew straight over the capsized boat. I thought Dusi Khan might still be hanging on to it, but although I circled round twice I saw no sign of him. I turned then towards the launch, landed to leeward of her, taxied up, came to a stop within pistol range. Two men were on the deck, Hamzar, our skipper, and one of the crew. Stark fear was

in their faces. The skipper started to gabble in Ki-Swahili, but I cut him short.

"Have you a boat?"

"Yes, yes, Great Master," he answered shakily.

"Launch it at once. How many men have you aboard?"

"There are but five of us, Great Master, three are sick, and——"

"And on the dhow?"

"But four—and all them are sick."

"Launch the boat at once," I shouted.

It was a dinghy identical with that on which we had escaped. They lowered it over the stern and came out to us. I climbed down and got in.

"Will you cover them, please?" I asked Patricia, "I'm going to investigate."

As soon as I got on board I threw a rope to her, and made the seaplane fast. Then I bade the two natives face the machine. I made a careful reconnaissance. There were three negroes huddled up on the after deck, one of them wounded, the others sick with fever. I looked into the engine room, then, pistol in hand, went down into the saloon. There were four sleeping-cabins running off from it. The first on the port side had evidently been used by Dusi Khan, for it reeked of his filthy cigarettes and Eastern perfume. I went in and then suddenly was startled by the sound of a voice:

"Blarst it, blarst it, you ruddy, blinkin' swine!"

· · *It was Captain Timms.* I rushed into the opposite cabin, and there he was, trussed up like a Christmas turkey on the floor.

"Come on, you blarsted 'eathen, gi' me a blank blank 'drink"; and then he saw me. "Oh, oh, Gawd!" His eyes bulged with terror . . . bound though he was, he shrank.

"Ge' back, ge' back, I ain't done you no 'arm; ge' back, ge' back, you was drowned, I knowed it, I warned you—ge' back . . ."

"Don't worry, Timms," I cried cheerily; "I'm not a spook."

"Ge' back . . . don't touch me. . . ."

"Cut the melodrama," said I, "as you once remarked to a lady friend of yours." I unloosed his lashings, and he sat up gasping.

"Oh my Gawd! Am I dreamin'? 'Ow in 'eavings name?" . . .

There was a Berkfeld filter in the saloon, and I got him a drink of water.

"You're not dreaming," I assured him. "We escaped in the dinghy, and were picked up by a Portuguese aeroplane! Now tell me what has happened."

I got his story from him by degrees. As the doctor had already told me, he had gone down to the beach to search for me and had walked to and fro for the best part of two hours.

"I sat down on the sand, for it was mortal 'ot an' sticky, an' maybe I went to sleep an' maybe I didn't. 'Owsomever, it were on the deck o' this 'ere craft where I woke, and that — son o' Pharaoh were a-bendin' over me wiv a drink. ' 'Ere,' says 'e, 'you take a little stimulant,' an' 'e puts it up to my lips. It were champagne, an' I 'ad a good niff on it afore I asks 'im 'ow 'e would like a little

timulant—'an' 'anded 'im one fair on 'is perfumed
aug.

"Well, then it were 'ell let loose—'ell—'ell an'
no mistake. I smashes one nigger's jore in, it
quashes up like a ripe tomato, then I gits ole
Pharaoh agin' in the chops. 'E sorter pulled in 'is
orns arter that an' sits dahn to rest, an' I thought 'e
was goin' to take the count—when one o' them there
blame coal 'ulks comes be'ind me an' fetches me one
on the bows wiv a marlin' spike or somfing 'ard an'
eavy—an' I founders."

Timms went on to tell how he regained conscious-
ness in the place where I had found him, and then
he learnt from Dusi Khan, that Trout, shortly before
my own dramatic arrival, after promising to carry
on the diving, had got drunk and fallen overboard.
He had disappeared before the little boats were
manned.

"'That bein' so,' says he, pleasant like, 'I'll be
wantin' a good man to take over 'is job. The wages'll
be twenty quid a week an' fifty quid when the
job's over.' What I says back, an' I says it emphatic,
was, 'Don't you try to come it over me, you—
ruddy dago, or I'll blinkin' well bash the other
side of yer awful face.'

"Wiv that 'e gets 'is monkey up, an' 'e takes a
pencil from 'is pocket an' sticks it up me nostril.
'You English pig,' says 'e, 'I will show you,' an' 'e
amuses isself for a bit doin' operations up me nose
wiv the pencil."

'After torturing the captain in this devilish manner,
the Egyptian left him bound and without water.

"The blinkin' dago, 'e comes in abaht an hour

ago. 'Well,' says 'e, 'you'll be pleased to 'ear I've found the wreck wivout you, an' as soon as I've done what I want to do, I'm goin' to drop you overboard for the sharks to eat, an' that'll be a nicer end than what Dr. Flint an' the gel's brother'll 'ave, coz I'm goin' to do 'em in in a special way.' Then 'e goes off quick arter drainin' a glass o' water in front o' me. Gawd! if I ever gets 'old of that there swine."

"I don't think you ever will," I said, but I was far too excited to explain things fully. I helped him up on deck, and gave him a deck chair under the awnings.

"Captain Timms," Patricia cried in amazement.

"Aye, it's Captain Timms all right," he answered dolefully. "What there's left of 'im."

"He was captured by Dusi Khan," I explained. "You'll hardly believe it, but he actually refused a drink. Look here, captain. We've capsized the Egyptian boat, the crew escaped to the island and Dusi Khan is drowned. We're off to the shore now to bring the rest of 'em aboard. Will you cover the two niggers here? I don't think they'll give any trouble, but if they do——"

"Leave it to me," he replied. "I'll get the stiffness out o' me limbs in ten minutes, and, Gawd! if the dirty swine as much as stir, I'll lay 'em out."

"I'm sorry the Pharaoh's drowned though," he added. "I'd 'a' like to 'ad a talk wiv 'im private."

Personally I felt no sense of bereavement at the thought of the Egyptian's death, nor did my conscience tweak me by reason of the part I had played in it. I would have saved him if he had clung to

the boat. Yet I doubt if he would have thanked me.

Miss Howard and I got the dinghy and started for the shore.

"Still thrilled?" I asked.

Her face was tense with excitement.

"I—I don't know. It was terrible—seeing that man drown. I shall never forget it." She shuddered. "I can see his face now."

"But you didn't see the wreck?"

"What do you mean?" she asked tremulously.

"They were just at it," I replied. "I could see it distinctly from a thousand feet."

"Then—we—you can get at it."

"We shall dive for it as soon as Timms is ready, I hope."

She made no answer, but there was little need for her to let on what was in her mind. Within the next few hours she would know what the case contained, and my heart went out to her.

"Miss Howard," I said. "If we *do* find the case, and it doesn't contain what you believe it to, you—you'll let me be friends with you still? I shall be finished then with Doctor Flint. I—I—want to—go on."

She averted her eyes, but I saw they were wet with tears.

"Yes, of course," she answered. "How else could I regard you? You saved my life; I owe everything to you. But—I—don't know what will happen. We shall go home—at once—and then—oh—please don't talk about it. I'm still believing, please let me go on."

We had reached the dhow, and going alongside I interviewed the crew. Most of them were sick, and all of them seemed utterly demoralised. I didn't waste any time with them, and we completed the journey to the boat in silence.

"Would you mind guarding the boat?" I said as soon as we got out. "There are three of these niggers still free on the island, and we don't want to take any more risks."

"You're going to bring the doctor down? Don't you think we'd all better return to the launch? It would be more convenient for the diving."

"That's awfully sporting of you," I replied. "It will save a lot of bother, and I think I ought to tell you—it's poor comfort, I fear—that—if there is a treasure in the wreck—Dr. Flint has waived all claim to it. I'm only carrying on with him under those conditions."

She gave a little cry of astonishment, and then I think the full significance of what I had said dawned upon her. But she spoke bravely.

"Please go on."

I left her and rapidly climbed the path to the camp. I entered the hut. Gonzalez was sitting on his bed with his hands pressed tightly against his stomach. Howard was still lying down, but he looked considerably better. I had no time for explanations, although under the circumstances I believe one was due to the Portuguese at least. I told them that we had taken the launch and that they must get down to the beach at once.

To Doctor Flint I said even less. I simply picked

him up in my arms and carried him down, put him into the boat and returned to help the others.

It was no easy matter. The Portuguese, who could walk, kept up an unceasing bombardment of questions, interspersed with groans, and Howard was as helpless as a sack of flour. He rolled for the last ten yards, finishing up with his face half buried in the loose sand.

But at last we got them safe on board, and leaving all kit for the time being we pushed off to sea.

It was an embarrassing journey. As I had to do the rowing I steadfastly refused to speak, and Patricia was too busy ministering to her brother's comfort to take much notice of the doctor's and the Portuguese's questions. I was considerably relieved to get alongside the launch and to see Timms quite merry and bright again.

We got Howard out first and carried him down to his cabin. The Portuguese was only too glad to go below himself, and leaving Patricia to attend to them both, I gave Doctor Flint a seat on the fore-deck. I then proceeded to tell him the whole story. When I described the sighting of the wreck and my dive at the boat, he became fearfully excited.

"Ah, I'm glad the scoundrel's finished," he cried hoarsely. "You're certain you saw the wreck? They were hauling. Captain Timms, you are well again? Can you go down now?"

Timms winked.

"I thought that would be it," he said. "Me just free from the clutches o' death, an' you expects me to go a-divin' for them dead men's bones, an' a man just drowned on the spot? It ain't 'uman, it

ain't. I orter be in orspital, instead a' gropin' about the sea bottom among the dead. Still, if you orders me, it's me job, I reckon."

"Splendid," the old man interrupted. "Where's the boat? We'll get away at once."

I told him that Patricia had given us leave to use the launch.

"You'll remember that I told you, sir, that she thinks it's something entirely different we're looking for."

"Yes, old boy—of course I do. But she's going to be disappointed. It's good of her to let us use the launch, very good indeed it is. We'd better be going off at once. How far is the wreck?"

I turned to Hamzar, who was sitting on his haunches on the deck, looking a considerably less formidable person than he had done the night of the fight. In answer to my questions, he told me that so far as he knew the engines were in order, but that the Swahili engineer was among the three who had been in the capsized boats.

"Thou art anxious to have thy neck broken on the gallows at Zanzibar?" I inquired.

He wasn't.

"Thou art a schemer, a liar and a murderer," I went on. "What thinkest thou of thy great master Dusi Khan now? His magic has availed him nothing. He is drowned."

"Allah hath willed it," he replied philosophically. "He was a great prince, and I served him. My brothers and I desire forgiveness. Let us go to our dhow."

"We need thy help here," I said. "Later we shall see if thy neck is worth saving."

He salaamed.

"We are thy servants, Great Master."

Patricia returned to the deck at that moment. She had changed her clothes, but looked very tired and worried.

"Captain Timms will dive at once," I said. "Shall we move the launch in?"

"Please do as you like," she answered. "But I can't see the engineer. Can you start the motor? I'm afraid I know nothing about it."

I went down into the tiny engine room. For reasons of economy she had been converted from a twin to a single screw, and the motor was of the ordinary marine type. I made a quick examination, flooded the carburetter and gave the fly-wheel a swing. It started easily. I threw it out of gear, and went back to the deck.

"All's ready, captain," I said. "Do you think she'll float safely up to the boat there?"

"Aye, she don't draw mor'n a three feet o' water. I'll take 'er in myself."

With the help of Hamzar and the one fit negro, we weighed anchor and then, very gingerly, for the Portuguese seaplane was in tow, we crept along towards the reef. Fifty yards away we anchored again and paid out the cable until we caught the boat's mooring rope. The line on which the two negroes were hauling had sunk, but we were now lying immediately above the spot where I reckoned the wreck to be.

Captain Timms had found his own suit, and he

With a clean, swift tug he drew the knife out.

"What have you got there?" he asked.

"Peroxide," Patricia answered. "I'll syringe it out."

"Splendid—nothing better. Clean it out well, and then tie it up. . . . Oh, Cleveland"—his nanner changed again—"this is most unfortunate. So near. It's a bitter disappointment to me. We'll have to wait."

"I'm all right," the captain put in gamely. "Fix the damn thing up an' I'll get on wiv me job."

"No, it's impossible," the doctor said. "You must keep quite still. Get him into a chair as soon as you can."

Patricia bandaged him, and we made him as comfortable as we could. Although his wound was fortunately but a flesh one, for him to attempt to dive was out of the question. It might be weeks before he was well enough for that.

Obviously there were only two courses open to us: that we should return to Zanzibar or Mombasa for another diver, or that I should go down myself. The water was shallow. At Whiteport I had practised in twice that depth, and Timms was well enough to watch the pump and generally to superintend. I was feeling so sick of the whole wretched business that I would have welcomed any action that would bring it to a speedy end. In my present mood I would even contemplate a chair in my father's office.

I didn't waste any time.

"Will you help me with the suit?" I said to Patricia. "The boy will watch the pump."

"You're going to try?" the doctor shouted. "Oh, I am grateful to you. Are you quite sure of it? You won't run any risks. Splendid. You will—you will help, Miss Howard, won't you? You will not regret it. I am not an ungrateful man."

"Thank you," she out in curtly. "I have as much interest in the finding of this wreck as you have. If the case is there—if it does contain what I believe it to contain——"

"You have told her, Cleveland, you have told her what I said?"

"I have, sir, and I go down only on the conditions that I discussed with you."

"Splendid. Oh, I am anxious. I do hope you will be safe, old fellow. I shall never forgive myself. Ah, go on. Don't waste any time; I am full of hope."

Personally I had little, and it was with a singular lack of enthusiasm for adventure and romance that I got into the rubber suit. I yearned for rest and the simpler things of life.

The heat was terrific, and long before Patricia bolted the corslet I was bathed with perspiration.

"How'd you like a nice iced beer now," said Timms maliciously, "wiv little blocks of ice a-floatin' among the froth? Oh aye—I'd forgotten you'd gone dry. Now for 'is little top-knot, lady. That'll keep 'is 'ead nice an' cool. Mind—you've fouled the thread."

In spite of our protests, he got up and put the finishing touches himself, bantering me unmercifully as he did so. My mind, however, was full of very serious thoughts. I was really very scared indeed.

With my brass-soled boots and leader weights, it was all I could do to move to the edge of the deck where the ten-foot diving ladder was fixed.

"You won't see much, you'll 'ave to go by feel mostly; but then if you've been down afore you'll be knowin' what to do. I'll see that your pressure keeps O. K. Now for your little peep-'ole."

We closed up the glass window and a dead silence followed, until the pumps started, and the air began to squirt through the inlet valve. Then Patricia helped my feet to the ladder rungs, and I slowly climbed down into the sea.

With the water reaching to my neck, I stopped; instinctively afraid that the next step would have it pouring in through the window—an awful sensation, which only the thug, thug of the pump and the confidence bred of my previous experience at Whiteport overcame. Once my head was under, however, I had no more fear. I was conscious only of a terrific pain in my ears and a sense of lightness. But the pain went when I swallowed and the "airy" feeling made it easier for me to leave the last rung of the ladder, and to trust myself to the rope alone.

I sank very slowly, and it seemed that I must have dropped a hundred fathoms before my feet

encountered the bottom. I stopped then, to accustom my eyes to the novel lighting. Very little could I see. Everything was blurred and indefinite, as though I had been plunged into the heart of a cloud. Yet something big and dark loomed out in front. I stretched out my hands and encountered the slimy fronds of weed, then very cautiously I crawled forward.

I had gone no more than six yards, when my shoulder struck against a solid unyielding mass, and my fingers, searching through the weed and sea growth, closed on a projecting piece of timber. *It was the wreck*, beyond a doubt. Indistinctly I could trace, through the forest of weed, her looming shape. She was lying on her starboard side, head pointing in towards the reef. Little but her hull remained. The deck had burst open and my hand running along her beam found a wide breach, big enough for a man to crawl through. The case, Doctor Flint had told me, was lying in the hold about amidships when the dhow foundered. The weed thereabouts seemed clearer and very cautiously I crept into the breach, hands stretched groping in front. I recoiled hastily, as something alive and twisting grasped my arm, and I whipped out the diver's knife at my waist. It relaxed suddenly before I struck, and the water became clouded with an inky fluid. Evidently I had disturbed an octopus. I crept back again, shaking with fear.

Upbraiding myself for my cowardice, I made another effort, this time getting as far into the hold as the rope and air pipes would permit. Every-

where I groped, soft yielding things met my touch. The wood was grown thick with sponges, sea-squirts and great anemones. Fishes darted against the windows of my helmet, and another octopus twisted its sucking arms about my legs. God, the place was a chamber of horrors. I gasped with terror as my hand went straight into the gaping mouth of a monster sea anemone, and its tentacles closed like a trap upon my fingers. I pulled it back and after that, groped only with my feet and elbows. . . .

Yet it was all to no purpose: *the case was not there*. I searched every yard of the hold; there was nothing, nothing but weed and nightmare things. Climbing out, I tried to get my bearings as to the relative position of the little boat when she had capsized, If the case had been dragged away from the wreck, then it ought to be somewhere in between the two. I guessed it by the run of the air pipe, and then, not without relief, I turned my back upon the wreck and started to move along the bottom again. I was beginning to feel more used to the light and to move with more deliberation. I adopted a half-crawling movement, like that of an anthropoid ape, with my arms swung low and my hands searching incessantly among the weed for something hard and box-like.

I went like that for a fair distance, then gradually worked back towards the wreck again. For twenty minutes or so I worked backwards and forwards in this manner, and by that time I felt certain that I had covered the whole of the bottom between the wreck and the position of the capsized boat. The first sense of disappointment that had come when

I discovered the hold to be empty was slowly changing into despair.

Surely if the case was as big as the doctor had described it to be, I should have found it by now. It could not possibly be on any other side but this. If the negroes had been hauling on it, it should—— *God! my arm had suddenly become entangled in a rope.* I pulled the bight of it towards me, twisted it out of the tangled weed and hauled in—the little boat's cable? No, the end came in too freely, soon it was in my hand. The other end? I pushed the hove-in coils from me, hauled and hauled until at last the rope tightened. It was fast to something in the weed a few yards away. I followed as quickly as the sea jungle would allow, until it ended in a mass of knots—*on the long-sought case.*

At last!

In my excitement I threw my arms about it, madly felt with my fingers its rusty weed-grown shape. Not a doubt, not a fleeting suspicion of doubt. . . . It was the case—the case of the forty skulls.

Carefully I examined the knots by which the rope was secured to it. The diver, whoever he was, had done his work well. It was firmly lashed and the rope was strong enough for twice the strain.

I had no time for a signal now, no time to walk back and ascend in a normal good diver-like manner. I slipped the weights from my back and front, screwed up the spring of the outlet valve, took a firm hold of the rope secured to the case; then, as the suit swelled out with the trapped up air, I slowly

ascended, paying out the rope as I went, but holding the end of it as firmly as a drowning man would grip a life-line.

I came to the surface half a cable's length from the launch, and floated with my helmet sticking out. They saw me at once, and I was towed gently in to the ladder. Then came the hardest job of all, for nothing would have made me leave go of my rope until I had the end bent round the ladder, and the bight of it picked up with a boat-hook and secured to the rails. That done, however, the rest was comparatively easy. I climbed the ladder unassisted and sank down on the deck, while Patricia unscrewed the helmet.

I shall never forget the look of suppressed excitement on the faces of Patricia and Flint as my head appeared. I might have been Davy Jones himself.

"Well," I said, "I've found it."

Neither of them spoke.

"At the end of the rope. . . . Get me out. . . . Phew! drink, quick."

Quickly I kicked myself free of the diving suit. We started to haul on the rope. There was very little slack. Soon we could feel the case dragging along the bottom. Once it caught in something and held fast, but we dislodged it by jerking, and then came the heavy continuous strain that told us that it had left the bottom. At Captain Timm's advice I jumped into the dinghy and brought it alongside so that I could haul and guide at the same time.

A cloud of glinting sand streaming out into the current betokened its appearance, and then

I could see the weed upon it and finally the rusty metal where the rope had chafed the weed away. I reached in my arms, got a good grip and guided it carefully to the surface; a last heave and it was out of the water and the dinghy safe beneath it.

It was no small matter with only Patricia and the negro to get it up on to the deck, and to push it well in from the edge away from the sea. And when this was safely done, I sat down to get my breath.

The doctor, crazy with excitement, went down on his knees before it.

"Yes, yes! . . . not a doubt . . . splendid! I knew it, I knew we should find it. Come, come, Cleveland, my dear boy, let us open it. The outer case. . . . Yes, I thought that would go . . . but no, the holes have not been here long. The inner case would resist, yes, I'm sure, quite sure. Tools, old boy, have you tools?"

I fetched a hammer and a cold chisel from the engine room. The outer case beneath its encrustation of coral and weed was rusted thin as paper, but, as the doctor suggested, it was likely that the several gaping holes in it had not come until it had been disturbed by the native divers. Parts of it I could tear off with my hand, but the framework which bore the double locks delayed my work considerably, and I had to use the shaft of a huge steel spanner to lever the last piece of it off.

The inner case then stood clean, and so little the worse for its long immersion that the black enamel in parts still retained its polish. It was an ordinary

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tropical steel uniform case, fitted like the outer one with two locks of ordinary pattern.

"It would save time if we had a key," I said to Patricia. "Have you some, by any chance? we might be lucky enough."

She went down to her cabin and returned with a small bunch, evidently belonging to her trunks. The fourth that I tried did fit—both locks, and then, with a little easing of the chisel, the lid yielded, and I pushed it back.

My hand was trembling as I cleared away a layer of dried moss and grass. I dared not look at Patricia. My fingers had encountered something hard and slightly crumbling. . . . I cleared the packing from it. . . . *It was a skull.* Pressed tightly to it was another, and another.

The doctor was right, the treasure was a myth. The case contained the forty skulls. Four rows of them were now laid bare to the gaze of each of us, except the man who valued them.

"Look, look underneath them," said the girl in a voice strained hard with emotion. I took one of them out and held it up to her. She stretched out her hand, her fingers half closed on it, and then she swayed, as though she were going to faint. I jumped up quickly to her side, and before I could save it the skull had dropped to the deck.

"I'm all right, quite. . . . I just felt dizzy. . . . Oh, look, it's smashed."

"Cleveland, what has happened?" cried the doctor. "Smashed? one of the skulls? don't tell me, don't tell me."

The skull had indeed smashed. It had split

from back to front, but the halves still held. I picked it up gently, and then I saw that the brain cavity was packed loosely with cotton wool. I slipped my fingers in and pulled this out, and felt a number of small pea-like objects wrapped inside. One of them dropped to the deck and rolled along under the doctor's chair. Timms moved to pick it up, but before he had reached it I had exposed half a dozen of them, and, my God! it did not need more than half a glance to tell me what they were.

Diamonds!

Diamonds, very crudely cut and polished, but diamonds, diamonds that sparkled like little suns. I held in my hand a treasure that, at the lowest estimate, might be worth thousands of pounds.

"Pat, Pat," I cried exultantly, "you were right. Hooray! hooray."

"Cleveland, what has happened? tell me, tell me . . . the skulls, are they not there . . . the skulls?"

"Yes, yes, of course they are, and so's the treasure too," I cried. "Are all of them packed with diamonds?"

"Diamonds—diamonds—what are you talking about, old boy? Explain, diamonds . . . treasure?"

I explained to him, and his incredulity increased.

"Impossible, impossible, old fellow; it cannot be. Pass one of them to me."

I took out another and gave it to him.

"Ah, yes, I remember this one, remember it well I do. It's heavy though, tremendously heavy . . . my memory. . . ."

I put my little finger up the hole at the base of it and eased out another plug of cotton wool. Diamonds, emeralds, topazes, and a gorgeous opal fell out into my hand. I tried the third one, which was similarly loaded, then the fourth and fifth. Patricia brought a work basket and we filled it before we had got to the bottom row of the forty skulls.

"Doctor Flint," I said then, "the skulls have yielded so far a treasure which it would be no exaggeration to value at half a million pounds. You still say that you were unaware of its existence."

"My boy . . . Cleveland . . . I cannot believe you. Impossible, utterly impossible. . . . I examined the skulls myself. . . ."

"Who packed them, sir?"

He thought awhile.

"Yes, I remember well. Sladen. . . . I left them to him. I was busy the night we left . . . a porter was sick, but I saw them before we put the final layer of packing on them . . . they were arranged in four rows of five . . . yes, I remember well—and yes—my word, yes—Sladen asked me not to touch them . . . the scoundrel."

"And you still stand by our agreement, sir, you make no claim for the treasure?"

"My dear boy," he answered, and his face flushed with happiness. "I have got my skulls—could I ask anything else of life?"

A sudden bitterness came over me. Our adventure was at an end. The skulls were found—the treasure was found. Both the doctor and Miss

Howard had realised their life's ambition. And there remained for me but an aching heart.

Both Howard and Lieut. Suero Gonzalez made a quick recovery from their illness. The latter accepted my apologies for the liberty I had taken with his seaplane in a thoroughly sporting manner. He refused to believe, although I put the suggestion to him, that I had deliberately poisoned that tin of salmon. He accepted a cheque of a hundred pounds from the doctor with an embarrassment which manifest in a Portuguese amazed me, and he made a delightfully pathetic farewell speech to Patricia, before he climbed into his machine early next morning and set out on his belated journey to Port Amelia.

We gave the Swahili sailors of the dhow the launch's dinghy, and what we could spare of our stores, their wages, and a promise that nothing more would be said of their treacherous behaviour. The dinghy would enable them to rescue the three men who had escaped to the island, and also enable them to retrieve their rudder and sail.

We sailed from Thunder Island that afternoon in the launch.

It was late evening. Captain Timms, with his arm still in a sling, was at the wheel, and I had just come up from the engine-room for a breath of the cool night air. I was leaning over the rails of the forward deck, gazing at the mermaid's head silhouetted against the phosphorescent plumes that curved from the prow, and thinking of the time when I

had put my arms about her as I listened to the voice of Dusi Khan—when I heard footsteps behind me. It was Patricia. She was dressed in something soft and silky, and she wore no cloak.

“Hallo!” she cried in her old cool voice. “What are you doing? You look just like those people one sees in melodrama—gazing into the cold black waters with a speechless despair in their faces—Can I do it—can I do it?”

I laughed.

“I’m not contemplating suicide, if that is what you mean. It’s something far more serious. Something far worse than suicide that I contemplate.”

She came close to me.

“What?”

“Work,” I answered. “I’m going to be respectable. Like the prodigal son of old, I’m going back to my father’s house, to beg forgiveness and the fatted calf. I’m going out of the Romance and Adventure trade.”

“But it has paid, hasn’t it? Don’t tell me that you still refuse to share in the treasure. It—it must be worth a million. There’ll be at least half that when all the legal points are settled up. I think it’s just absurd of you to refuse. If it hadn’t been for you, we should never have got it at all. Oh, if you only knew how grateful I feel! I—I—must tell you——”

I did not answer.

“I must tell you,” she continued in a shaking voice, “I can never be happy until I do. My brother——”

"I think I know," I said, "I heard indirectly."

"The scandal—about the money?"

"Yes—that's why—I am so glad. Your brother has been a fool. He is yet, I suppose. But I've seen white in him. I don't have much faith in reformed ~~rakes~~ as a rule. I don't condone people just because they've got a spark of decency in them, any more than I condemn good men because they've got a spark of bad. But your brother, if I am any judge of character at all, has just had rotten luck."

"You—you—believe that he is—that he can be a man?"

"Certainly I do."

Impulsively she gripped my arm.

"I thank you for that above everything." With a nervous cry she moved away again. But it was too late. I seized her hand and spoke hoarsely.

"Is it—is it because of that—that—you fear me—the scandal because——"

"I—don't," she stammered, "I don't—I felt—before it was that in a way—I was—afraid of myself—your duty—I didn't want you to think—that I would——" She began to cry.

I put my arms about her and drew her to me in a passionate embrace.

"I love you," I said. "Pat, speak to me; do you love me?"

For answer she lifted up her tear-wet face to mine and smiled.

From the bridge above came the voice of Captain Timms, singing jovially.

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"A-A-And bring me safely home again to the
gel I left behind me!"


"Pat," I whispered, "I'm home to you for
ever."

"That's all I want, Dennis," she replied.

THE END

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